

# Authenticity and Its Perils: Who Is Left Out When Food Is “Authentic”?

**Abstract:** This article focuses on absence and exclusion within heritage food making in northern Italy. These absences and exclusions are structured by race and gender inequalities and not incidental to heritage food making but built into it. I argue for an understanding of heritage foods as what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) has called “capitalist ruins,” or that which is left behind when capitalist structures and forms recede from particular landscapes and sites, leaving people to piece together livelihoods in the aftermath. To do this, I draw from my long-term ethnographic and linguistic anthropological research with heritage food makers in northern Italy, who

primarily create various types of meat-based products, like salamis and sausages. The local concept of “nostrano” (our local) generates a type of authenticity that is also a chronotope, or a fusion of notions of time and space, which is key to how exclusions and absences are structured. Thinking of heritage food as a capitalist ruin, that is, as a product of capitalism and the inequalities it perpetuates, shows that although heritage food may be an answer for some—to save our way of doing things, our history, our livelihoods—it may also, perhaps always and simultaneously, be perilous and exclusionary for others.

THE LAST TIME I saw the woman I call Donatella at her farmhouse, nestled on a slope of one of the valleys in the north of the province of Bergamo, was in the summer of 2015. The eviction would go into effect later that week, and while she was relieved that her adult kids had found jobs and places to stay, she was still looking for a place and employment for herself. The house and workshop where she’d made local salamis and sausages for the last several years were almost empty. The outlying buildings that once housed her pigs and where she cured the salamis that she made from them were vacant as well—no sign left of the small business she’d built with the help of those same children. She had no time or inclination for nostalgia or regret when we talked about where she would go and what she might do: the long hours, unpredictable finances, and precarious week-to-week existence that had been heritage food production for her were in the past already. Although her efforts had contributed to her family’s and household’s upkeep for nearly a decade, an accident as small as breaking her leg, coming close on the heels of her husband losing his job as an electrician, had shattered the business, the family, and their home.

During that same summer research trip, I also visited another small-scale producer of heritage salamis, whom I call Pietro. His business, also based in his family’s farmhouse complex and involving a small cast of family members, was thriving. His salamis were on the menus of some of the hottest restaurants across the province, and, with financial help from an uncle, he’d built a restaurant and shop on their land, both

offering local foods including his own. In the few moments he was able to spend with me when I visited the shop and restaurant, he spoke of the outside patio they were building and local Slow Food initiatives he was helping to spearhead. With no spouse or children of his own, but ready capital and labor available through his extended family, Pietro’s efforts over the preceding five years were paying off.

This article begins with these two small-scale salami-makers in northern Italy to illustrate some of the exclusions and perils of authenticity, specifically in the making of so-called authentic, local food. Pietro painstakingly forged a successful business making traditional local salamis, building from a foundation of family support, technical training, previous work experience, and personal hard work. Donatella similarly worked day and night to build and maintain a successful business, raising pigs, making salamis by hand, and selling them at various local farmers’ markets, only to close her business, lose her farmhouse, and proclaim herself done with food production. These divergent stories of success and failure were shaped by the possibilities of authentic food production, which configure the artisanal producer in ways that exclude some people and reward others.

I got to know these two food makers during my ethnographic and linguistic anthropological research in the northern Italian province of Bergamo, ongoing since 2006. When I began this research, pivoting from a focus on heritage language to a focus on heritage food, the value of local food in Bergamo seemed relatively simple: it was “nostrano,” ours, or

“our local.” As I have written about elsewhere (Cavanaugh 2007, 2019), Bergamascos and other Italians saw Bergamasco food as peasant food, that is, simple, rough, and treasured by those who grew up eating it but less valued by others elsewhere. Some people made a living making it, especially those making products with EU and national GI recognition, and many deliberately chose to eat it, but Bergamasco foods, like polenta, cheese, and salami, were among many such choices most individuals and families I knew in Bergamo made.

Beginning in the early 2000s—the period in which Donatella and Pietro started their businesses—local food boomed in Bergamo, across Italy, in Europe, and elsewhere in the Global north (see, among others, Parasecoli 2022 for an overview of this phenomenon). In Italy, organizations like Slow Food and *Kilometro Zero* (Zero Kilometers) championed local foods and local consumption, arguing that foods produced in particular places had value because of their histories of production and consumption, and that food that traveled long distances from those places imposed both carbon debt and loss of taste and social connection. EU and Italian GI designations and the structures to uphold them increased exponentially; in Bergamo, the local Chamber of Commerce began its own initiative to support and promote Bergamasco foods. A Festival of Salami began in a small town on the plains of Bergamo, drawing participants who could eat local salami, watch it being made, and listen to politicians discuss the value and even necessity of pursuing a GI designation for it. Coldiretti, an Italian agricultural labor union, campaigned for and succeeded in changing laws and tax codes to allow farmers to sell directly to consumers, setting the ground for them—and others—to establish and cultivate farmers’ markets where consumers could buy from and interact with the people who grew and made their foods. In Italy and elsewhere, local foods became involved in various ways in what Fabio Parasecoli (2022: 9) calls “gastronativism,” or “the ideological use of food in politics to advance ideas about who belongs to a community (in any way it may be defined) and who doesn’t.” In other words, the meaning and value of local, authentic foods began to change, and rapidly.

During the same period, many Bergamascos I knew and talked to reported an economic shift, already underway and then exacerbated by the global financial crisis in 2008, a shift away from the full employment and economic prosperity that Bergamo, a key part of Italy’s post–World War II economic boom, had long enjoyed. Mothers among my interlocutors reported that their children were living with them through their twenties and into their thirties; many were un- or underemployed, struggling to save money to buy their own first home.<sup>1</sup> Compared to other regions, Bergamasco youth and

other employment remained relatively high, but many people I spoke to in the early and mid-2000s felt that the time when hard work would lead to prosperity was in the past. The growth of service sector jobs, begun in the 1980s and 1990s, coupled with the migration abroad of many of the older textile and manufacturing companies that had ensured work for so many of their grandparents and parents, figured prominently in the ways in which the people I knew spoke of the precarity they now feared, for themselves and their kids and grandkids. The hulking shells of former factories sprawled across areas in the valleys in the province’s north loomed large in representing the end of a manufacturing past that transformed Bergamo from one of Italy’s poorest provinces into one of its richest in the years following World War II. Other businesses in manufacturing and other arenas continued to thrive, but those empty shells symbolized a particularly industrial moment that had passed for good.

I pair these perceptions and experiences of precarity with the rise of local food as a movement and economic opportunity to set the stage for understanding and analyzing the successes and failures of heritage food production that Donatella and Pietro experienced. Such connections are key to illuminating the absences and exclusions structured by race and gender within heritage food making and that are not incidental to it but built into it. To appreciate these absences and exclusions, I suggest that we understand heritage foods to be what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) has called “capitalist ruins,” or that which is left behind when capitalist structures and forms recede from particular landscapes and sites, leaving people to piece together livelihoods in the aftermath. Donatella’s failures—her own ruin—as well as Pietro’s success were built on the ruins of how capitalism had shaped their environments, the physical and social landscape they lived within, the familial dynamics that shaped their businesses, and their own preparedness to make and sell Bergamasco foods. Their stories together illustrate the risks and perils of heritage food making.

## “Ours”

The notion of “heritage food” is a tightly bundled package of sometimes-contested material substances and practices and verbal and textual representations, as discussed in the Introduction to this section. The term generally refers to foods associated with a particular group’s histories of production and consumption as well as in a specific geographical territory (Cavanaugh 2007; Di Giovine, 2014; Grasseni 2007, 2014). Heritage foods are often highly regulated and

institutionally shaped both by governmental regulations and policies, such as the European Union's Geographic Indication (GI) schemas or national laws and standards, and non-governmental organizations such as Slow Food (Parkins and Craig 2006). Due to their associations with territories and the traditions of production understood as anchored in these places, heritage food is authentic food, that is, food authenticated through its connections to place, history, and tradition (Pratt 2007; Weiss 2012). Authenticity, in turn, "allows consumers to have direct access to the true nature not only of what they eat but also of the people that produce, cook, and serve food to them" (Parasecoli 2022: 88–89). It is these people, the producers of authentic, heritage foods, who concern me here. They are artisanal producers, embodying the figure so compellingly laid out in the Introduction to this section, making value within global capitalist conditions. But not all who participate in this profession are able to embody this figure as effectively as others, producing absences, exclusions, and inequalities.

In northern Italy, as in many places across the peninsula, the notion of heritage is built from a particular type of authenticity: the idea of *nostrano*, which translates roughly as "our local," an "our" that includes ties to place and implications of home. Food items that are *nostrano* are homegrown, homemade, artisanal, and made in "our" (local, traditional) way. It is similar to the French concept of "terroir," which captures the environmental, historical, and cultural assemblages that produce particular tastes and qualities in food and wine (as discussed extensively in this section's Introduction). Both *nostrano* and *terroir* build on place, shared traditions of production and consumption, and their associated communities; both are productively used in the construction, promotion, and maintenance of heritage foods. As the Introduction to this section illustrates, *terroir* has historically been developed through capitalist efforts to exclude as well as promote.

*Nostrano*, however, requires a positionality that *terroir* does not: *terroir* may conjure a "we" associated with a place, while *nostrano* points to a group's shared experience and location, a process that builds from long-standing historical groupings but also serves to cement them as meaningful categories. As a concept at least, *terroir* may exclude, perhaps simply via geography, while *nostrano* always does, as the "we" it is built on and builds is always distinct from those "you's" and "they's" around it. Although often presented as a given, unproblematic category, the production of *nostrano* is an ongoing achievement, as the in-group it indexes is large, complex, and dynamic. In Bergamo, it points to those who are Bergamasco, a category that may vary between encompassing all residents in this area and circumscribing

only those whose families originate there, thus excluding anyone who has taken up residence there, such as migrants from outside of Italy as well as other regions of Italy.

*Nostrano* is a chronotope, in the sense that it fuses time and space in a particular configuration of both. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) explored how chronotopes work within and shape particular literary narratives, and many linguistic anthropologists have analyzed how chronotopes are constructed and function within other genres of text and talk (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014; Dick 2010; Perrino 2011). Chronotopes build perspectives on the world in that they delimit what may be attended to within their frame, and how events, processes, and people can be understood and encountered according to their temporal and locational logics. The chronotope established and indexed by the opening phrase "Once upon a time . . .," for instance, sets up what's to follow as located in an unspecified but imaginary time and place, where fairies, magical beasts, and heteronormative romance can be expected. Or consider the chronotope of the capitalist ruin, which depicts a particular industrial past as culminating not in progress or technological advancement in the present and future but in current decrepitude and the potential for transformative material recuperation. The chronotope of *nostrano* marries a particular place (Bergamo and its province in this case) and a particular version of this place's history (as consistent, continuous, and homogeneously experienced by all Bergamascos) such that the combination adds up to "how we (Bergamascos) do things and have always done them here." Like all chronotopes, it erases historical disjunctures, people, and events that don't fit within its frame, such that the heterogeneity that characterizes so much of the province, its histories, and residents' experiences within it due to, for example, varying class positions, gender, and migration to and out of the area, is erased.

Illustrations of this chronotope can be found across the websites of the food production companies large and technologically savvy enough to support one (Donatella's did not, though Pietro's did). For example, the website of a larger company (20 to 30 employees) that I'll call Grasso overflows not just with descriptions of products but also with sepia-toned black-and-white photos of the predecessors of the current owners, a brother and sister. The photos include several images of their great-grandfather who founded the firm in 1880. On the home page, a photo montage includes photos of family celebrations, one of the building where the firm still operates, taken in the 1930s, and another of their grandfather with his arms around the necks of two large oxen, evidence of the family's long-term engagement with meat production. Text describes how the company has been in the same

building since its founding, and emphasizes both the traditional and artisanal nature of their products. Under the photo of their grandfather with the oxen, the text exclaims, “*Da allora esperienza, tradizione e valori antichi si sono tramandati inalterati di generazione in generazione*” (From that distant experience, traditions and ancient values have been handed down unchanged from generation to generation). While the word *nostrano* doesn’t appear, the concept is illustrated in the anchoring of food production in a particular Bergamasco location tethered together across multiple generations of the same family. Depictions like this—of company stories being family stories, both of which embody the traditions of this particular place—recurred across websites, marketing materials, and origin stories recounted to me about the companies with whom I have done research.<sup>2</sup>

## Exclusions

Among these companies, then, the chronope of *nostrano* and its framing of heritage food are deeply linked to the institution of the family. This association comes from the structures of the companies involved in producing heritage foods, through making or evaluating claims to generational continuity in production, or both. Essentially all of the companies I worked with that produced similar foods were family-based, meaning they were owned by a family and/or involved multiple generations of the same family working together within them. A number of these companies were owned by siblings (like Grasso, mentioned above), and others had various immediate and/or extended relatives working together within them. Many had company names that expressed these family relationships, such as the family surname paired with “and sons.” Many companies made explicit claims to generational continuity like Grasso’s, declaring in promotional materials or in conversation with me or others that they make products just like their grandfathers or great-grandfathers did. Several of the companies were founded by the fathers or grandfathers of the current owners, and nearly all of them included a multigenerational workforce, such that children and parents, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, as well as cousins and siblings were often co-workers. Not all these companies were staffed only with family, especially the larger ones (40 to 50 workers), but even these included family members spread out across the operation. For instance, one larger company was owned by four brothers, each of whom was in charge of a different area of operations, from finances to client relations to production. Their adult children headed up other areas (like shipping, order processing, and prepared food production),

often working up from entry-level positions. The company name paired their family surname with the Italian word for “brothers”: “Fratelli Rotelli.”

In an earlier research project about language practices and ideologies in Bergamo—where the local vernacular, Bergamasco, and the national standard, Italian, are spoken to varying degrees (Cavanaugh 2009)—I heard repeatedly about workplaces that included immigrants who spoke Bergamasco, sometimes without speaking Italian. I never actually met one of these immigrants (although I also didn’t spend much time in workplaces for that project, and none of the ones at which I did spend much time were related to food production), but this figure—of a thoroughly integrated “local immigrant” who seemed to have skipped over national belonging to fit themselves into the local community through their hard work ethic (highly valued locally) and adoption of the community’s vernacular—proved to be a durable, recurrent one. When I started spending time in workplaces for my current research with heritage food makers, this figure never appeared nor was it ever talked about. And indeed, I have never encountered an immigrant working in the small and medium-sized companies with whom I have done research. Certainly, companies as small as Donatella’s and Pietro’s employed only family members (none of whom were immigrants), but larger companies who hired from their local communities also did not seem to employ immigrants.

The usual explanation about absences or exclusions of this sort is that Bergamascos and northern Italians more generally are xenophobic and even racist, and that they prefer workers like themselves over workers who hail from elsewhere. Bergamo has long been a stronghold of the Northern League political party (more recently, simply the League) (Castellanos 2006; Wild 1996), which championed northern local traditions and ways of life, including local languages and foods, against the unifying forces of the national Italian government (Biorcio 1997; Cachafiero 2002; Cento Bull 1996, 2000). This populist, or “integralist” party, as Douglas Holmes (2000) has referred to the League and others like it across Europe, tend to combine anti-immigrant rhetoric and economic policies that favor certain regions over others. Undoubtedly, many Bergamascos have embraced these positions to various degrees.

But the tendency to paint all Bergamascos or even northerners with the same Northern League brush focuses attention on individuals and their personal beliefs and diverts it away from the structural, institutional constraints that shape these dynamics. The family-based structures of these companies and the particular and slow ways in which Italians are incorporating immigrants into families through marriage, for instance, means there are few avenues for immigrants to enter

these types of workplaces.<sup>3</sup> Put another way, there are not many immigrants (not yet at least) who have married into Italian families to become one of those extended family members who work in these companies.

Another institutionally shaped reason for this is the nature of heritage food itself. Because heritage food is so closely associated with those who originate from a particular place and can claim generations of having lived in that place, immigrants are perhaps viewed as not the right type of people to produce it.

In other words, immigrants do not embody the ideal artisanal producer of Bergamasco food, in part because they originate elsewhere, but also because of how immigrants are racialized in Italy as non-white. Valentina Pagliai (2011), for instance, has shown how important small talk and other discursive processes are to the everyday linguistic negotiation of likeness and difference, which acts to racialize immigrants as non-white, often through highlighting their status as non-Italian. Her work (among others, such as Krause and Li 2022 and Perrino 2020) demonstrates that although the Italian history of reckoning racial and ethnic differences is quite different from that of the United States or the United Kingdom, race is an available category for differentiating among people and one that helps organize social inequalities across the country (see Krause and Bressan 2018 and Casti 2004 for information about immigrants in Prato and Bergamo, respectively). Given the vitriol so often hurled at immigrants in Italy, evident, for instance, in a previous government's denying ports of entry to boats carrying immigrants from north Africa, it is impossible to deny that race is a powerful organizing factor of social inequality in Italy right now, including in heritage food production.<sup>4</sup> And as Elizabeth L. Krause (in this section) has shown about the role of Chinese immigrants in Made in Italy fast fashion production, the roles of immigrants in producing goods marketed as quintessentially "Italian" is complex and often contradictory. The chronotope of nostrano, which organizes and underpins so much of how local food is valued, heightens considerations of who belongs to categories and places.

Gender is another site where social inequality is being reproduced through the multiple institutions that make up heritage food production, organized around women's and men's roles in the home, family, and workplace. Roles within these family businesses are doubly constrained by gender: bosses (heads of businesses) *and* fathers (heads of families) are normatively male, meaning both that more bosses are male but also that cultural stereotypes of bosses are comprised of characteristics that are gendered male, like hard work, assertiveness, authoritativeness, even working outside the home at all.

Women in Italy are still expected to do most, if not all, of the domestic labor involving housework and childcare, even if they work outside of the home, as many do (Altintas and Sullivan 2016). While men are understood to be laborers of various sorts, women do family, and are less commonly defined through their relation to work outside the home (Krause 2005, 2009; Yanagisako 2002). As Silvia Federici has argued, family is "the most important institution for the appropriation and concealment of women's labor" (2004: 97).

In the family companies with whom I've done research, this translates both into fewer women working within them than men, but also that the jobs women do in these companies often fall within a few narrow categories, such as working in offices or in client relations. Very rarely were women involved in the hands-on work of food production. In the single case in which a woman was directly involved in the hands-on work—Donatella—she was also the boss and single most important worker in her family-based company. While women worked in and for the other companies I worked with, they were rarely in public-facing or decision-making positions—though their work may have been essential to the success of the company—nor did they often work directly in production.

To give a few examples: the brother and sister who owned Grasso both worked at the company. He ran client and public relations, driving all over the region to engage with clients old and new, organizing the company's presence at various business-to-business events, and generally acting as the public face of the company. His sister ran the office, dealing with the extensive paperwork of running a business, including interfacing with governmental and other inspection entities. When I was introduced to the company for the first time, I was directed to talk to him as the owner, and it was only after having toured the facility and spent time there watching production that I met his sister and learned about her role in the business. Similarly, among the adult children stepping into leadership roles (and working at all) in the Rotelli Brothers company, only one of these was a woman, and she ran the office, taking orders from clients and keeping track of paperwork in general. While the office labor of these two women was essential to the businesses, their lack of involvement in production and confinement to office work made them seem less essential to the companies, both to insiders and outsiders, and their work potentially less valued.

This is not surprising, as capitalism has long been shaped by and has helped to shape gender inequalities. As Sherry Ortner (2019: 178) has argued, "capitalism not only exploits but is in many ways shaped and organized by the effects of kinship solidarity and the power of patriarchal domination." Capitalist production and the relations and conditions of

kinship—often separated out as the domestic sphere—are intimately connected and profitably analyzed as such, as many scholars have demonstrated (Bear et al. 2015; Marr 2021). In Italy, it has been well documented that family firms are often sites of gendered domination, and that gender shapes whose labor is more valued within family firms (Ghezzi 2005; Hadjimichalis 2006; Ross 2004; Yanagisako 2002). In the companies with whom I have done research, this results in both few women working in the company, fewer women occupying public-facing positions of power within those companies, and even fewer women doing the hands-on work of making the products themselves.

As a female ethnographer, I always felt the masculinity of the spaces of salami and sausage making. Butchering was almost entirely done by men in the companies I spent time in, but also I was treated with a politeness and care that marked me as an outsider and, I felt, as a woman. The white coats I was loaned to allow me into these spaces (along with hair and shoe coverings) hung on me as if made for larger, differently built, bodies, and I was always a little outside the camaraderie and joking that I saw male participants take up with each other, no matter what their acquaintance. Donatella also seemed constrained in how she could socialize, being addressed often as “Signora” rather than her first name, which brought both a degree of formality and distance to her work interactions that were absent when men used each other’s first names and clapped each other on the back, for instance (for more details see Cavanaugh 2021). As I have written about elsewhere (Cavanaugh 2016), talk like this is a type of labor, which impacts producers’ success, and, like all talk, will be shaped by speakers’ gendered, class-based, and racialized experiences.

## Ruins

The family-based structure of companies making these foods in Bergamo town and province is one key mechanism of exclusion around race and gender (class plays another role but is beyond the scope of this article). At the same time, contemporary capitalism is often seen as a threat to heritage, and family-based production is one answer to this threat. This family-based structure may act as a bulwark against the exigencies of contemporary capital (Blim 1990; Blim and Goffi 2014; Paxson 2013; Smart and Smart 2005), allowing for flexible labor practices, shared earnings, an assumption of loyalty on the part of workers, and, in this case, the market value of being able to claim generational continuity of production to prove the company’s bona fides in making food that is

nostrano. But certain types of people are inherently excluded from benefiting and profiting from heritage food—and this is a feature, not a bug, of how heritage food production works. The “us” upon which nostrano is built excludes as much as includes. This is true because heritage food and its instantiations like nostrano are products of capitalism, responses to the limits of what global capitalism can provide, shaped by the possibilities for labor and profit that global capitalism affords.

Bergamo has a long history of textile manufacturing and resource extraction such as mining, but was also part of the so-called economic engine that produced the “boom” in industrialization that followed World War II (Besana 1997; Della Valentina 1984). Textile and construction material manufacturing largely drove this boom in Bergamo, reshaping landscapes in both the mountain valleys in the north of the province of Bergamo and in the plains in the southern half of the province in the 1950s and 1960s (Belotti 1989; Bertacchi 1981; Cento Bull et al 1993). By the 1980s and 1990s, however, labor started to move into the service sector and away from factory labor, as, for instance, the textiles industry largely moved to China and other sites outside of Europe (as documented by Sylvia Yanagisako [2002] for the neighboring province of Como; see also Martinelli et al. 1999). By the early 2000s, a number of large factories across the province sat empty, and those who had worked in them had to leave the workforce, find jobs in other areas, or compete for the few remaining factory positions, which became not only more competitive but also less secure.<sup>5</sup>

Donatella and Pietro, positioned very differently vis-à-vis wage work, both turned to heritage food production to make a living and a livelihood. Only one has been successful in their endeavors, as heritage food making requires more than just individual efforts and labor or even the labor of a nuclear family, but also various types of social and cultural capital that support many small businesses. Note that although both companies involved family, and thus fit in some ways the dominant forms of other heritage food production companies in Bergamo, only Pietro’s involved more than a nuclear family, with extended kin, cross-generational labor, and sharing of resources buttressing the hard day-to-day labor of food production. As a man, perhaps being able to recruit and organize this labor was easier for Pietro, as Donatella often complained that her kids, upon whose labor she and the business so depended, did not always listen to her direction nor show up to do the work she needed. Perhaps even more importantly, Donatella had no extended family providing additional capital and other support, such as Pietro’s uncle has done, including allowing him to use the family’s farm compound and by financing the building of the new restaurant

and shop. Also unlike the other companies with whom I have worked, there were no cousins, brothers, sisters, fathers, nephews, aunts, or uncles adding their labor to her own. While much is particular to these two cases, the gendered patterns of exclusion across all the companies with whom I worked that were presented above suggest that the different obstacles and advantages Pietro and Donatella faced were shaped by more than personal circumstances.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing has argued that “precarity is a globally coordinated phenomenon” (2015: 205), made visible if we track “shifting patches of ruination” left behind by capitalism, which generate their own patterns of exclusion. We can view heritage and nostrano food production as strategies to recuperate the ruin of local places and their less than modern pasts. However, heritage is not an equal opportunity concept or modality, nor is its local expression in nostrano: it must exclude, and in systematic ways that align with previous and ongoing inequalities. Heritage and nostrano foods emerge from an allegedly unbroken chain of generations doing some version of the same thing, generations structured by an enduring patriarchal structure, which recognized and valued male heads of families, male labor, masculine expertise and knowledge, and male-associated activities like butchering. It also generally excluded people from beyond its culturally and politically policed borders, especially migrants from abroad.

Bergamo, long part of the industrious north, Italy’s economic engine (Bagnasco 1977; Leydi 1977) is riddled with what Tsing (2015: 6) calls “spaces of abandonment for asset production”—evident in those factories in the north of the province that used to employ thousands and now stand empty, as well as in those that remain that offer only “*pochi soldi*” (little money, as Donatella put it to me, in Italian) to those like Donatella who now rely on them. These “shifting patches of ruination” are demonstrated as well in the EU’s development of a special origin designation for “mountain products”<sup>6</sup> and local efforts to recuperate the economies of the mountainous zones of the province, even as the plains fill with industries of myriad sorts. Patchiness, indeed!

Tsing found such patches in the forests of the northwest of the United States, which had been extensively logged by a once-thriving lumber industry and now provide precarious seasonal opportunities for matsutake mushroom foragers. Ruined by capitalist production, these forests now provide a site for new economic possibilities to emerge, where foraging and bartering produce economic and other values for those who participate in these activities, even as they are nodes in a capitalist chain that stretches globally to include Japanese consumers and connoisseurs and multiple intermediaries. For Tsing, it is capitalist industry that created


these patches of ruin and their possibilities for recuperation, but what thrives in these spaces may also present new possibilities outside of capitalist production and circulation.

In Bergamo, similarly, previous industry and prosperity set the stage for current precarity. Heritage and nostrano food production, recuperating an agricultural past set apart from industry and idealized as scaled to the family and not the factory, has sprung up in the spaces left behind when factories failed, or have scaled back or moved away. Nostrano food production in Bergamo, then, is built on capitalist ruins, such as the shuttered factories that dot the valleys around where Donatella’s family farm used to be. But it is also *itself* a capitalist ruin, produced by the global restructuring of labor and industry that has taken so many industries out of Bergamo and northern Italy (Blim and Goffi 2014; Yanagisako and Rofel 2019). Heritage food—as a concept as well as a way to make a living—and the increased market value of nostrano products in particular emerged only recently, this rise mirroring in reverse the decline in industry and stable factory work across the province. The turn to heritage food as an economic and social strategy grew out of ongoing conditions of precarity, which in Bergamo takes the form of abandoned factories, relative high youth unemployment, and ongoing national political efforts to make work more flexible (Molé, 2011; Muehlebach 2012; Rosina 2013). Parasecoli (2022) has argued that the growth of gastronomy during the same period rose out of increasing globalization, the growth of neoliberalism, the 2008 financial crisis, and the vast inequalities these have created around the world. I would argue that the rise of locally valued food as a charged political issue has co-occurred with its increasing availability as a way to make a living, to be profited from.

The precarity that drove Donatella first to embrace and then to flee from heritage food production is, as Tsing and others have noted, a globally produced phenomenon and condition. The flows of labor and industry similarly shaped the possibilities for Pietro to build a business dependent on family resources, but also located on the family farming compound, or “podere.” This podere once housed multiple families (as attested in family photographs, some of which are posted on Pietro’s business website and promotional materials) until the so-called “economic miracle” of the postwar period afforded those families a path out of subsistence agriculture and the patron–client relations that characterized a large part of the province’s agriculture and much of its population until the postwar boom (Belotti 1989; Della Valentina 1984). The podere and land around it are a capitalist ruin from the twentieth-century wave of capitalism, when industry remade the landscapes of the province and the possibilities for Bergamasco families.

Indeed, part of what makes heritage food-making more broadly a capitalist ruin is its foundation in concepts like *nostrano*, and the exclusions that it structures. The efforts and labor of people like Donatella, Pietro, and the many other Bergamascos with whom I have done research; the landscape and history of Bergamo, and its current potentials; the structures and meanings of family; and the connections and disjunctures between the lived now and imagined pasts condense into the chronotope of *nostrano*. This chronotope in turn shapes the values that can be produced through the labor of producers like Donatella, Pietro, and many others, just as mushroom foraging in the US Northwest produced both economic and other values for those who participated in these activities.

In this configuration, *nostrano* and its emplaced history bring with them the perils of exclusion, valuing only some people's participation in food making and entirely excluding that of others. I do not believe it is coincidental that the only company owned and run by a woman among those with whom I worked was also the only one to fail so completely. As I have written about elsewhere (Cavanaugh 2016, 2021), Donatella had limited access not only to the social and cultural capital of extended family and the resources it affords, but also less opportunity to enact the gendered practices that I observed to be key to building the social and professional networks so essential for success. And neither of these companies, nor any of the others I worked with, included immigrants from outside of Italy among their workers, though the number of such residents in the province has grown tremendously over the last three decades.

Thinking about heritage food as a capitalist ruin, as the product of capitalism and the inequalities it perpetuates, helps us see that although heritage foods, authenticated through their links to places and the people of those places, may be the answer for some — to save *our* way of doing things, *our* history, *our* livelihoods — they may also, perhaps always and simultaneously, be perilous for others. Building an “us” always leaves out someone as a “them.” 

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## NOTES

1. Italian newspapers have carried stories amplifying this phenomenon since the early 2000s. For example, see [www.italiaoggi.it/news/i-giovani-italiani-restano-a-casa-dei-genitori-fino-a-35-anni-2265546](http://www.italiaoggi.it/news/i-giovani-italiani-restano-a-casa-dei-genitori-fino-a-35-anni-2265546) (accessed September 2022).
2. I have done ethnographic research with four companies that specialize in producing salumi (cured meat products) in periods over several years, and interacted with perhaps thirty other salumi and other heritage food producers in various contexts, from farmers' markets and business-to-business conventions, to site visits when I shadowed a government veterinarian.
3. This is a complicated situation that bears more attention than can be given here. According to ISTAT, while the rate of marriages between Italians and foreigners has risen over the last two decades (9.5% in 2002 to 19.4% in 2020), the ratio of Italian men marrying foreigners is more than twice that of Italian women (10,870 and 3,453, respectively, in 2020). Given how predominantly male these workplaces are, the lower rate of in-marrying men overall means fewer potentially non-Italian in-marrying co-workers.
4. I do not know how my ethnographic observations among salumi-makers in Bergamo would hold up to heritage food production in other regions or to other types of food production. I mean here only to note that immigrants racialized as non-white and seen as non-Italian do not fit these idealized figure of artisanal production captured by the chronotope of *nostrano*.
5. Some of these abandoned industrial spaces have become part of what is called “industrial archaeology” (*archeologia industriale*) as well as subject to various types of renovation and renewal, while others sit empty. On industrial archaeology in Bergamo, see [www.ecodibergamo.it/stories/eppen/cultura/arte/siti-di-archeologia-industriale-da-visitare-a-bergamo-e-in-provincia\\_1369502\\_11](http://www.ecodibergamo.it/stories/eppen/cultura/arte/siti-di-archeologia-industriale-da-visitare-a-bergamo-e-in-provincia_1369502_11) (accessed April 2022).
6. For example, see [https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/food-safety-and-quality/certification/quality-labels/quality-schemes-explained\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/food-safety-and-quality/certification/quality-labels/quality-schemes-explained_en) (accessed April 2022).

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