

**T**ripe. Why is it always the damned tripe? A vast plate of the stuff, gleaming and faintly sinister. From a distance, it looks like fleshy seaweed, ragged curls of meat with incongruously pretty frills. Naked as the day it was cut, there's no sauce, no garnish save a desultory slice of lemon. No respite. I dig my fork deep into the pile of chopped, boiled stomach and transfer it to my mouth. The texture is the same as ever, rubbery with the faintest squeak as it's crushed between the molars. The taste, too, a hint of decay, a whisper of the farmyard floor. But wait...there's something else. Something firm and gelatinous yet crunchy. I look up quizzically at my hosts, Carmine Pauciullo and Maria Luisa Gagliardi, and point toward the plate. "Esophagus," says Pauciullo, a handsome native Neapolitan. "A real treat. You like it?" I pause and chew for a moment longer. Then I nod. The tripe's superlative. Magnificent. The throat, too. "Naples," he cries, his hands held aloft. "The best food in the world!"

We're sitting at the back of **Antica Cantina del Gallo**, an osteria and pizzeria many miles removed from the usual tourist trail. Pauciullo and Gagliardi are the greatest of guides, as well versed in the city's Greek roots as they are in the glories of chile-spiked *friarielli*, that great, bitter broccoli-like vegetable. Here in Rione Sanità, a district outside the old city walls, sumptuous old palazzos peep out from behind dreary concrete façades. In this poorer part of town, the past is a luxury, something to be used rather than preserved. But wherever you are in Naples, it's impossible to be unmoved.

People may moan about the din, the crime, the trash, the heat and the dirt. They scurry through the shadowy, narrow street of Spaccanapoli, eyes firmly ahead, cameras and watches well hidden from sight. To them, this is a place to be endured, to tick off before retiring, battered but unhurt, to the limpid, civilized charms of the Amalfi Coast. I'm a tourist, too, of course. But one who adores this Italian city above all others—the allure of

the singsong accent, the theatrical aplomb of the most mundane conversations. And the food, dear God, the food. Because in Naples, every mouthful is relished as if it were the very last on earth. Which is hardly surprising, considering the city is close to a major fault line and less than six miles from Mount Vesuvius. The volcano is both provider and destroyer, with its lushly fertile slopes and the ever-present threat of its next eruption.

Rosario Silvestri, the owner of Antica Cantina del Gallo, is short and intense, his hands dusted with flour. He's in full flow, but I can barely understand a word. As the conversation becomes more intense, he gestures wildly, grabs my shoulder and grips my arm. Is he predicting the end of civilization as we know it? Or acting out what he'd do to anyone who disrespected his daughter? Nope, he's just recounting the history of his restaurant, which served its first customer back in 1898. This is the Neapolitan way. He implores me to smell the tomatoes. He inhales, deeply, his eyes closed in ecstasy. I love this man. And his tomatoes, too: San Marzano, of course, fresh from the slopes of Vesuvius. The best in the world.

The feast before us is divine:  
a burnished ball of baked dough,  
**STUFFED WITH A TOMATO**  
that bursts its contents all over a blob  
of molten provolone as you bite in.

Just like the mozzarella, sweet and coolly lactic. And the seafood hauled from the Bay of Naples.

The simple feast filling the table before us is divine: A burnished ball of baked dough is stuffed with a tiny tomato that bursts its contents all over a blob of molten provolone as you bite in. "When I first came here from Rome," says Gagliardi, "parts of Naples seemed like the Middle East. It was just so exotic. At times, it doesn't seem Italian at all." Local Gragnano pasta comes next,

plump, ridged tubes with a scattering of fresh ricotta. Every bite delights, the pasta pert and the cheese fresh. "In Rome, everything is imposing," says Pauciullo between bites. "In Naples, everything is a theater. But it's not some Italian Disneyland. Everybody lives."

Even the very poorest. Between 1880 and 1920, millions of Italians left Vesuvius and southern Italy behind them and set off for a fresh start in the New World. With them came meatballs, pizza, pasta and tomato sauce. The most famous food of Italy is the food of Naples and the country's southern half. Bastardized, sure, but there's no doubting its roots. "No ethnic community has had as powerful an influence on American food as they have," writes Claudia Roden in *The Food of Italy*. "...And from there the pizzas and pastas and ice creams of southern Italy went on to conquer the world."

**O**kay, so even the most fervent Naples adorers have to admit the city is not entirely pristine. R. W. Apple Jr., the late, great *New York Times* correspondent, contributor to these very pages and a man who covered more war zones than I've had *fritti misti*, admitted that in the late '80s, Naples became the "city that Italy forgot and everyone else avoided. Poor. Dirty. Hopelessly corrupt." Things are better now. But Pauciullo nods when I ask about its reputation and says, "This is an area traditionally ruled by the Guappo." He digs into the *friarielli*, so beloved in this area. "Not enough chile," he mutters. "They aren't the Camorra, which is the local criminal group. Or the Mafia, who are Sicilian. Rather..." He looks up at the wall, with all its old family photographs and the ubiquitous portraits of Totò, the great comedian, and Sophia Loren. Along with San Gennaro, these are the patron saints of Naples. He chews thoughtfully and says, "They're father figures, people who sort out disputes." With a gun and a blackjack? I ask. "No," he says. "Naples is a city where smug-