

A taste of saffron from Tuscany - full of twists and turns

It is a story of the revival of the culture of growing a forgotten crop once quite commonly cultivated in a region. It all commenced with a yellow tinge in the ancient tubs of an old and abandoned Roman building!

The story began to unfold at an estate in Campagnatico, Tuscany of Italy when a yellow color was discovered by a localite in the Roman ruin and eventually equated with saffron. These estates were quite ubiquitous in rural Italy and of a kind preferred by urbanites to flee from bustling cities. In one such nest of someone Mr. X, he stumbled upon a dilapidated Roman ruin poignant with history. The color detected, words spread and reached the protagonist of our story, Ms. Anna. She was an accountant from Grosseto - a small town near the Tyrrhenian Sea. She bought a small piece of land in the area and intended to cultivate after her retirement; then she heard of this, and as the event goes by, it kindled her interest. She enquired and was told that the kind of color can only be obtained from saffron. A brief chat with local elders confirmed that once saffron was grown in Tuscany but the culture has now become a craft of bygone era. Anna was reluctant to leave her hope and stay in despair, and so jumped to rejuvenate the lost-craft of saffron cultivation on her own. According to her, it went like this:

The whole process is full of delicate handling of the flowers that bloom for two weeks and must be picked up early morning before opening up. The tender ones after collecting in baskets, the prodigal red pistils to be picked up using hands and dry them.

The whole journey was quite tiresome given the very prolonged and laborious process of cultivation, harvesting, and extraction, but her perseverance and dedication were paid off. She was happy with her golden harvest, at last, it followed many things after her success story. She took initiative to sensitize local farmers, put her effort to hold a conference to teach people and formation of co-operatives, drawing on local governance, creating the market, etc. It turned out that the place was ideal for saffron cultivation and was once sprawling farmland famed for the crop. Tuscan and Umbrian Slow Food movement provided them with additional inertia to take it further.

So, Ms. Anna reinvented the lost tradition and mobilized local farmers which became a standard textbook example.

Now, what does the story of Anna convey? Yes, a lot of things, saffron, Tuscany, lost art, the place of food, etc. But it also tells that the food in the twenty-first century is a globalized item



mixed not only with human movement and trade, also with palatability, lost in the mist and rediscovery, resurrection and market creation, governance and community initiative.

Source: Roberta Sonnino (2013) *Local foodscapes: place and power in the agri-food system*, *Acta Agriculturae Scandinavica, Section B — Soil & Plant Science*, 63:sup1, 2-7

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