



IL MARITOZZO: Rome's Only Native-Son Sweet

by Lucy Gordan | Food | 0 comments



The Traditional *Maritzo*

While *gelato*, *panettone*, *cannoli*, *torrone*, and *tiramisù* are beloved worldwide, other Italian sweets are less well-known and even regional. Some examples are *bûnet* in Piemonte, *sbrisolona* in Lombardy, *torta Barozzi* in Emilia-Romagna, *tozzetti* in Tuscany and Umbria, *sfogliatelle*, *babà*, *struffoli* and *la pastiera* in Naples, *seadas* in Sardinia, and *cassata* and *granite* of multiple flavors in Sicily. In Rome for centuries now the local sweet is the *maritzo*, under-publicized outside *Caput Mundi*.

As I wrote in my article about this year's Tiramisù World Championship, many Italian foods are celebrated on a specific day of the year. For the past three years *Maritzo Day* is December 7, so now is perfect timing for its publicity.

The press conference to present the third edition of *Maritzo Day*, founded by Gabriele Lupo and Silvia Pontarelli of the food-blog *Tavole Romane*, was held on November 26th at the Art Hotel, Via Margutta 56, the artists' street just off Piazza di Spagna. This location was chosen because the Art Hotel was the first hotel to serve *maritzo* at breakfast.





Gabielle Lupo., Gigi Cartoni, and Silvia Pontarelli

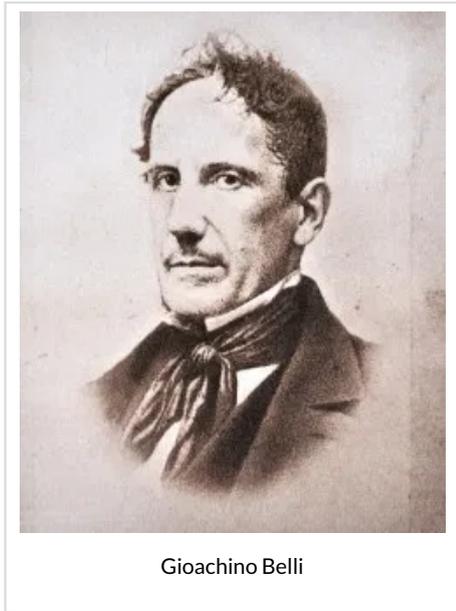
At the start of the conference the scholar, home poet, and city guide Gigi Cartoni, nicknamed "*Er Salustro*" after the famous 19th-century Roman poet Trilussa, gave a brief history in Roman dialect or *romanesco* of this soft bun of oblong shape, a kind of bread traditionally made of flour, eggs, olive oil, salt, and honey, and then "dressed-up" for special occasions.

In ancient times "this loaf" was baked and then seasoned with honey and raisins. Its name derives from the Latin, *mas*, *maris* meaning man or companion/co-worker. The farmers' fast food, it gave them enough energy to work all-day in the fields without returning home for lunch.

During the Middle Ages these loaves were one of the few "church approved" "treat" foods that the Romans were permitted to eat while fasting during Lent, known in doctrine as "*Extra Horam*" or "Extra Hour". Their filling of raisins, pine nuts, and candied fruit made them a kind of "sweet fix". Hence it was nicknamed "*Santo Maritozzo*".

Recipes for such loaves started to appear in cookbooks in the 1700s, but it wasn't until the 1800s that the "loaves" were given their current name *maritozzo*, an affection dialectic version of the Italian word *marito* or husband.

One tradition claims that the girls of a neighborhood held a contest of who could make the best *maritozzo*. The winner was then sure to be courted by the most eligible bachelor. Another more plausible story was that on March 1 or the first Friday of that month, not on modern Valentine's Day, a girl's fiancé would give his bride-to-be this pastry, its icing on top depicting two pierced hearts. Inside he concealed a gift: a ring or other small gold object. In his sonnet "*Er padre de li Santi*" (1832), another Roman poet, Gioachino Belli (1791-1863) writing in dialect (he wrote 2279 such sonnets between 1824-46) compares the *maritozzo* to a phallus because of its elongated shape. He also called it "*Pan di Passerina*" or "Sparrow's Bread", probably in homage to the ancient Roman poet, Catullus's euphemistic definition of the sparrow as a phallus. (Many of Belli's sonnets were loosely translated by the British novelist, satirist and composer Anthony Burgess (1917-1993), who lived in Rome during the first half of the 1970s).



Gioachino Belli

Giggi Zanozzo (1860-1911), one of Belli's literary heirs and anthropologist, in his book *Usi e costumi del popolo Romano* (1907) described how priests risked choking on the huge number of *maritozzi* they stuffed in their mouths even while officiating at mass. Moreover, he recounts how during Lent it was a must to go to church and pray and then afterwards to make love and eat *maritozzi* (in both senses of the word.) Speaking of the *maritozzo's* relationship to love-making Zanozzo writes in romanesco: "*Er primo pe' li presciolosi, er zeconno pe' gli sposi, er terzo pe' ll'innammorati, e'r quarto pe' li disperati*"

or "the first one is for those in a hurry, the second for newlyweds, the third for lovers, and the fourth for the desperate." During the first half of the 20th century the *maritozzo*, baked not as a loaf but bun-size, was considered a pastry for the upper classes. The "in" pastry-bar was the historic Caffè Greco, founded in 1760 on elegant Via Condotti and now at risk of closing on January 8, 2020 at least temporarily due to an eviction notice because its owner, the Ospedale Israelitico, wants to raise the management's rent of 17,000 euros per month to an unaffordable 150,000 euros. After the Second World War, the "in"-location moved to the Via Veneto and the *maritozzo* was split open and filled with whipped cream. Its other fillings, now both sweet and salty, date to 2017's first *Maritozzo* Day.



Giggi Zanozzo

This year's event differs from the two earlier *Maritozzo* Days. For the first time it will be celebrated outside Rome, in cities throughout Italy: Milan, Turin, Brescia, Città di Castello, Viterbo, Siracusa and Trapani. Secondly, some of the participating health-concerned pastry chefs will color some of their *maritozzi* "rosa" or "pink" by adding red and dried fruits or other natural colorings, like beet juice, and seeds to unrefined flour,



only a tiny amount of sugar or its natural substitutes, and no gluten or lactose. Thus people with chronic health problems like diabetes or cancer patients undergoing treatments can eat them.

Thirdly and most importantly, in order to participate it's necessary to download a personal coupon from the website www.maritozzoday.it, where there there's a list of the over 30 Roman participants and the ingredients of their many proposed fillings, as well as a map of their locations so you can personalize your itinerary. Most are pastry shops and coffee bars, but some are restaurants including "All'Oro" with one Michelin star, which will offer *maritozzi* to their guests as dessert in the evening, even though, like *weisswurst* in Bavaria, *maritozzi* are a breakfast dish.

Among the non-traditional whipped cream but sweet fillings on offer will be "Black Forest", "Sacher" and "Oreo". When it comes to salty, many fillings are based on Roman specialties are: *spaghetti alla carbonara*, *coratella* and artichokes, *coda alla vaccinara*, *mortadella* and *puntarelle*, and *trippa*. Some fillings will debut for the occasion; others are still secret.

Upon presentation of the downloaded coupon, each *maritozzo*, for as long as the supply lasts (2018 counted over 5,000 customers), will cost one euro, which will be then donated to the Breast Unit of the Fatebenefratelli Hospital on Rome's Tiber Island for the purchase of a cold cap to reduce the loss of hair during chemotherapy.

Nota bene: Whether you are a resident of Rome or a future visitor, be sure to print the list of participants so you can plan your *maritozzi* itinerary after December 7.

