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Eating Under Water: Speculative Jewish Gastronomy in Venice

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Abstract This essay explores the intersections of food, culture, and resilience through the lens of speculative Jewish gastronomy in Venice. It begins with general reflections on the nexus between food, religion, and ecology, before examining the project *La cucina ebraica del futuro* (Future Jewish Cuisine), which reimagines traditional Jewish Venetian menus from an ecocritical perspective. The text reflects on how food serves as a site of cultural memory and environmental speculation, highlighting gastronomy's dual role as a material and symbolic medium for addressing environmental challenges, envisioning sustainable futures, and negotiating identity under precarious conditions.

Keywords Foodscapes. Venice. Jewish foodways. Speculative gastronomy. Environmental Humanities.

A Jewish woman struggles for survival in the heart of war-ravaged Europe. She flees barefoot the fury of the Nazis into the forest, surviving on scraps, peels, and rotten meat. One day – the conflict is nearing its end, but, as she remembers it, it is precisely at this stage that many succumb to starvation – a Russian farmer rescues her, offering a piece of meat.

The woman, reduced to skin and bones, refuses this gift. Decades later, she recounts this episode to her mystified grandson, raised in the peace of affluent, overfed America.

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> "He saved your life". "I didn't eat it". "You didn't eat it?" "It was pork. I wouldn't eat pork." "Why?" "What do you mean why?" "What, because it wasn't kosher?" "Of course". "But not even to save your life?" "If nothing matters, there's nothing to save". (Safran Foer 2009, 16-17)

Se niente importa. Perché mangiamo animali? (If nothing matters. Why Do We Eat Animals?) became the Italian title of a book that, in English, is simply titled *Eating Animals*. Its author is the Jewish American writer Jonathan Safran Foer, the grandson who, starting from his grandmother's wartime stories, weaves a profound meditation on our relationship with meat and his own choice of vegetarianism – a difficult, and not always rigorous, decision. Ten years later, in his broader meditation *We Are the Weather*, he makes it even clearer that rethinking how we eat is essential to counter our devastating environmental predicament:

> Climate change is the greatest crisis humankind has ever faced, and it is a crisis that will always be simultaneously addressed together and faced alone. We cannot keep the kinds of meals we have known and also keep the planet we have known. We must either let some eating habits go or let the planet go. It is that straightforward, that fraught. Where were you when you made your decision? (Safran Foer 2019, 71)

The grandmother's anecdote is important for various reasons. The Jewish principle known as *Pikuach Nefesh*, 'the safeguarding of life', prioritizes saving human life above almost all other commandments, including the dietary laws of *kashrut*, as Esther Farbstein (2007, 282-3) shows precisely in relation to war events. However, in her dire situation, the young woman is asserting that what must be safeguarded is not only bare life, but also inner, spiritual life, a sense of self. Her act resonates with Jacques Derrida's philosophical meditation originally titled "Il faut bien manger", a French phrase which can mean "One must eat well" (as reads the English translation), but also "it is really necessary to eat", "it is necessary to eat well", or even "one must eat the good" (Costantini 2020, 2):

> "One must eat well" does not mean above all taking in and grasping in itself, but *learning* and *giving* to eat, learning-to-give-the-other-to-eat. One never eats entirely on one's own: this constitutes the rule underlying the statement, "One must eat well". It is a rule offering infinite hospitality. And in all differences, ruptures, and wars (one might even say wars of religion), "eating well" is at stake. Today more than ever. One must eat well – here is a maxim whose modalities and contents need only be varied, *ad infinitum*. (Derrida 1994, 282)

"One never eats entirely on one's own". The woman passes on to her grandson, who lives in a radically different situation, the example that the limits humans impose on themselves can be a fundamental resource, even in extreme circumstances. Arguably, we all live in extreme circumstances of a different kind. Just as Safran Foer's grandmother faced moral dilemmas in her context, contemporary food choices are shaped by ethical considerations on a planetary scale:

> scientists estimate that the global food system, particularly meat production and consumption, is responsible for 37 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions, showing that what people may once have considered a *personal* matter of diet is in fact *planetary* in its biospheric impacts. (Shukin 2021, 141)

The concept of limits as a device to safeguard all lives is also invoked by one of the most authoritative intellectuals to have brought the climate crisis to the forefront against all forms of denial and repression:

> it is impossible to see any way out of this crisis without an acceptance of limits and limitations, and this in turn, is, I think, intimately related to the idea of the sacred, however one may wish to conceive of it. (Ghosh 2016, 160-1)

Amitav Ghosh's reflection is part of his broader call to value the contribution of religious movements to the indispensable global mobilization against anthropogenic climate change. For Ghosh, a secular writer from a Hindu background, religious organizations have the capacity to awaken consciences, transcend the short-sighted geopolitical interests of nation-states, recognize intergenerational responsibilities, and imagine nonlinear changes outside of economistic or technocratic thinking dictated by optimistic trust in sustainability (161). Admittedly many religious organizations are complacently embedded within the political and economic systems polluting the planet, and some are even actively engaged in climate change denial; yet Ghosh's overall point is important also as a reminder that exclusively technocratic solutions to the crisis are, at best, wishful thinking.

Inspired by these and other thinkers, the Venice-based Beit Venezia – A home for Jewish culture, an independent foundation promoting international Jewish culture, launched a series of projects starting in 2018, dedicated to the connection between Judaism and ecology, under the motto "Living Under Water". The reference is to a joke, a time-honored form of Jewish critical thinking:

> *God announces the arrival of a new flood within two weeks to punish the evil of humans. Imams invite the followers of Islam to accept the will of Allah; the Pope calls on Catholics to repent of their sins*

> *and pray for the second coming of Christ; rabbis make an appeal to Jews: "We have fifteen days to learn how to live under water".*

Beit Venezia invited artists, scholars and activists to take this joke literally by collecting Jewish ideas and practices that address the environmental crisis, demanding urgent technological, cultural, and religious responses. Faced with the planetary challenge, we need to reinterpret our past, present, and future imaginaries, and Jewish culture, in its rich plurality, can and should, among others, offer a significant contribution both internally and externally, drawing from a painful history of catastrophes and traumas, resistance and resilience, as suggested by the joke. In recent times, new ecological thoughts and practices have emerged, drawing on the resources of Jewish tradition to adapt to the darkest scenarios but primarily to understand and transform our world (Krone 2024; Brumberg-Kraus 2024). "Living Under Water" has involved thinkers and artists who have come to Venice to observe and represent the crisis from the specific perspective of a city at the edge of climate change, with the inexorable rise of the waters only temporarily slowed by powerful but overly expensive and obsolescent technologies. Beit Venezia's premise is that to think 'in' Venice is to think not only 'about' Venice as much as 'from' Venice about (at least) all coastal cities. As Salvatore Settis argues, Venice is

> a thinking machine that allows us to ponder the very idea of the city, citizenship practices, urban life as sediments of history, as the experience of the here and now, as well as a project for a possible future. (Settis 2016, 170)

In this light, this open-ended project was meant from the start to disseminate its outcomes as far as possible. "Living Under Water" has so far produced a zine, created in both print and digital forms (Arnovitz, Bassi 2019), an exhibition at the Jerusalem Biennale in 2019, an exhibition in Krakow in 2022 as part of the most important European festival of Jewish culture, and a book of essays and artworks in both English and Polish, including various Jewish perspectives on the environmental crisis (Arnovitz, Bassi 2022) **[fig. 1]**. The latest installment focused on food, considered as an area where heritage, emotions and ecology interact very intensely. This is eloquently explained by the eighteen-year-old Sigmund Freud in a letter to his friend Eduard Silberstein in 1874:

> People are wrong to reproach religion for being of a metaphysical nature and for lacking the certainty of sensory perceptions. Rather, religion addresses the senses alone, and even the God-denier who is fortunate enough to belong to a *tolerably pious family* cannot deny

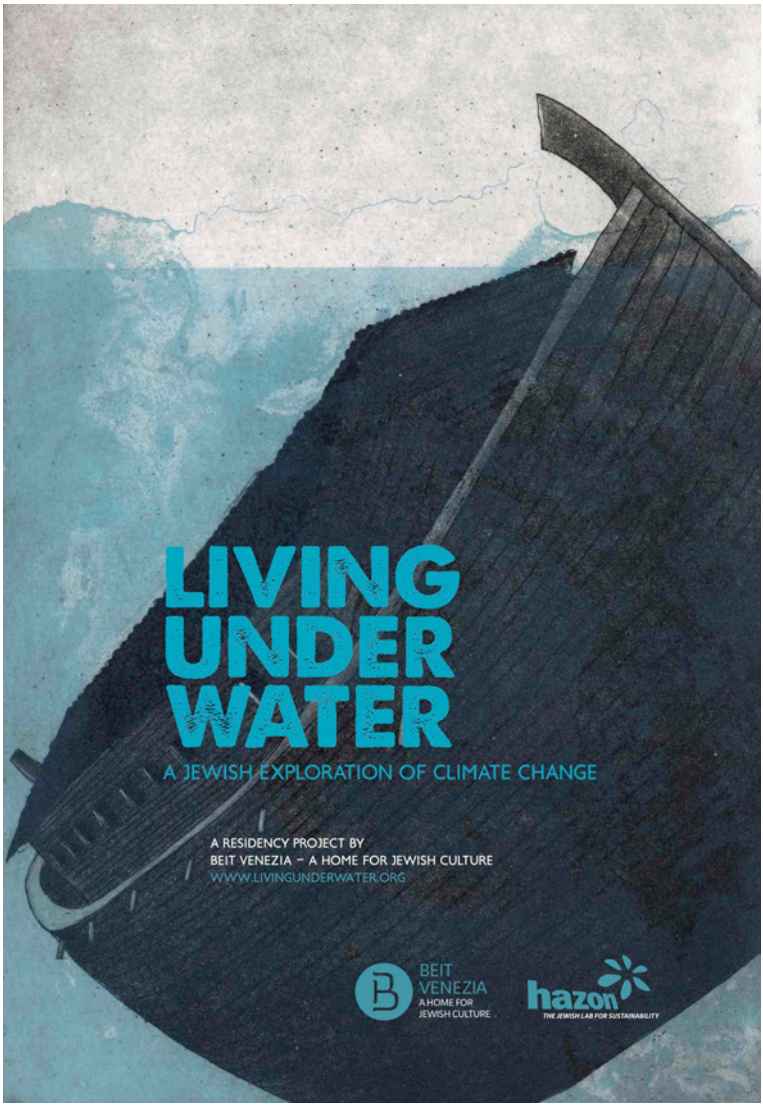

Figure 1 Cover of the *Living Under Water* zine

> the holiday when he puts a New Year's Day morsel to his lips. One might say that religion, consumed in moderation, stimulates the digestion, but that taken in excess it harms it. (Freud 1989, 62-3)

Unlike Safran Foer's anecdote on desperate times, Freud's piece of juvenilia helps us to examine the nexus between food and religion under normal circumstances. The material and physiological aspects of religious events, closely linked to sensory and emotional dimensions, often escape those who promote alternative diets based only on ethical or scientific arguments. These well-meaning attempts frequently ignore how, for many people, foods are primarily a matter of identity rather than mere convenience or habit. In other words, how can people be persuaded to eat more sustainably if that clashes with their beliefs, traditions, and emotional memory?

Beit Venezia addressed this crucial issue by seeking to imagine the future of the Italian Jewish culinary tradition, embodied by Giuliana Ascoli Vitali Norsa's *La cucina nella tradizione ebraica*, a popular book first published in 1970 and reprinted multiple times since. This rich cookbook shows how Italian Jewish culture is in fact a mosaic of diverse and intertwined traditions, making its cuisine extraordinarily varied in a country where food is also a strong cultural value. Today, many books and websites celebrate this culinary gold mine, partly driven by the exotic fascination with Italian gastronomy, but they are unlikely to include ecological reflections. And yet the future of food coincides with the future of the planet, and the Jewish dietary laws of *kashrut* can also function as a powerful reminder of our limits toward the world and a constant exercise in evaluating what we eat, including its hygienic, sanitary, and symbolic conditions. To these ancient rules, it is now essential to add a new awareness of the environmental impact of food, reflecting on Jewish history as the millennial story of a people that originated as a group of climate migrants who found refuge in Egypt and were reborn under the sign of catastrophic natural events, with seas parting and pandemics affecting human and non-human beings. *Kashrut* traditionally focuses on ritual purity and religious observance. In 1979 Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, coined the concept of *eco-kashrut* to broaden traditional rules to include environmental ethics, emphasizing sustainability and justice in food production. This modern adaptation aligns with the principle of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) by addressing the ecological impact of industrial agriculture and unsustainable practices. For example, choosing locally sourced or organic foods and avoiding products tied to deforestation or exploitation reflects an *eco-kashrut* mindset. This approach not only reinterprets ancient traditions for contemporary challenges but also reinforces the role of food ethics in global sustainability. *Eco-kashrut* is also one of the many religious ideas and practices contradicting the

pervasive stereotype of a monolithic Judeo-Christian tradition that advocates the human dominion over nature, inspired by an extremely influential and often misread article by Lynn White Jr. (1967).

La cucina ebraica del futuro (The Jewish Cuisine of the Future), a project supported by a law of the Veneto Region that promotes the dissemination of Jewish culture and realized in collaboration with the Museum of Jewish Padua, aimed to offer a small symbolic example of how a gastronomic heritage could bring people together, fostering dialogue between cultures, and connect the past, present, and future from an ecocritical perspective. The project involved three artists with complementary skills. Miriam Camerini, a performer, theater director, scholar of Judaism slated to become the first ordained Orthodox rabbi in Italy, was the indispensable guide to Jewish dietary laws, as evidenced by her book *Ricette e Precetti* (2019). Marco Bravetti, an experimental chef with bold creativity and a strong multicultural sensitivity, contributed his Venetian culinary knowledge and his guiding concept of 'limits' to the new Jewish field, in which he immersed himself with curiosity and enthusiasm. In 2021 Bravetti curated a special event called *Tide Tables*, in collaboration with cultural historian L. Sasha Gora (one of the authors of this volume) and food designer Katinka Versendaal. It is worth quoting the philosophy of this experiment in speculative gastronomy, which took the fascinating form of a four-course meal and a public event, because its format provided the inspiration for *La cucina ebraica del futuro*:

> One part meal and one part investigation, TideTables: Venetian Speculative Gastronomy casts food as a critical means with which to experience Venice and its lagoon. The table becomes a means with which to understand Venice's past and present and to shape its future. Reflecting on watery worlds, we – a chef, a cultural historian, and a food designer – speculate answers to Elspeth Probyn's question: "can we eat with the ocean?" In turn, we wonder: can Venice eat with the lagoon?
>
> In and out and up and down, this meal shadows the rhythms of the tide to ask: What does it mean to eat with something? What does it mean to eat with the tide or against it? And can we invite the lagoon to the table? These questions relate to larger debates about how human appetites change climate and how climate change, in turn, influences human appetites. (Versendaal, Gora, Bravetti 2021)

Andi Arnovitz, an American visual artist who has lived in Israel for many years, built on her previous residencies in Venice to enrich the final publication with evocative images that help visualize the future of food. In 2018 Arnovitz spent four weeks in Venice as the lead artists of the *Living Under Water* zine and witnessed an exceptional high tide, which would only be surpassed by the catastrophic *aqua granda* of the following year.

Figure 2 *Tide Tables* at Ocean Space, Venice (2021)

For all three participants, through their different media and forms, storytelling was a fundamental component of the experience, serving both to illuminate the historical layers going of local food and to explain the future scenarios that can help the readers and eaters to accept the innovative recipes, in spite of the unusual ingredients.

The project began with a visit to some Venetian Jewish families, who cooked for the participants and shared with them the memories and meanings of specific dishes. This first stage was crucial to explore the emotional component of food. The next step was the selection of two traditional menus from Ascoli Vitali Norsa's book, one for the winter and one for the spring seasons, corresponding to two different festive moments on the Jewish calendar. In the third stage Marco Bravetti reinvented the two menus in terms of future food sustainability. Each menu featured three recipes, offered both in the traditional version from *La cucina nella tradizione ebraica* and in Bravetti's experimental reinterpretation. The first menu was prepared for Shabbat, the weekly day of rest in Judaism, starting on Friday at sunset and with dinner as its first meal. Commemorating and re-enacting the seventh day in the creation of world and prescribing the suspension of all working activities, the Sabbath symbolizes and embodies that sense of sacred limits informing the project (Heschel 2005). The menu was then put to the test in a performative moment, which constituted the culmination of the residency. In her tried-and-true format "Shabbat for All", Camerini led Friday-evening dinner with a mixed audience of Jews and non-Jews, following the usual ritual accompanied by music, readings, and reflections. Helped by his invaluable team from Tocia!, the "food and community"

platform that he founded, Bravetti cooked and explained the process that led him to conceive and transform the traditional recipes into their future-oriented versions, striking a delicate balance between maintaining traditional symbolic meanings and adding new environmental elements. Finally, the whole project coalesced into a book, *La cucina ebraica del futuro* (2023), elegantly illustrated by Andi Arnovitz **[fig. 3]**.

As Camerini explains in her insightful introductory text, in Venice and Ferrara it is traditional to eat once a year a dish that celebrates the passage of the Jewish people through the Red Sea, corresponding to the Sabbath reading of Chapter 15 of the Book of Exodus, also known as *Shabbat Beshallach*:

> And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea went back toward morning to its full flow, with the Egyptians fleeing toward it, and the Lord shook out the Egyptians into the sea. And the waters came back and covered the chariots and the riders of all Pharaoh's force who were coming after them in the sea, not a single one of them remained. And the Israelites went on dry land in the midst of the sea. The waters a wall to them on the right and on their left. (Ex. 15:27-8; Alter 2019, 272-3)

This dramatic story of freedom from slavery was commemorated and exorcized in a pasta dish called *frisensal*. While its origin and name, as for many traditional foods, cannot be located precisely, Camerini vividly explains its ingredients and symbolism:

> The tagliatelle are the waves of the sea, the pine nuts are the spears and swords scattered in the sea, and the raisins are the wheels of the chariots. The meatballs and pieces of goose sausage are even the drowned pursuers. Frisensal is also called Pharaoh's Wheel. (Camerini 2023, 27; transl. by the Author)

Bravetti's reimagining of the recipe goes hand in hand with Camerini's philosophical reconfiguration:

> For our Venetian Shabbat […] we decided to explore the story and its theatrical–gastronomic representation by imagining a new world, where the victors don't necessarily have to consume their defeated enemies, but where the true victory, as the entire narrative of Exodus teaches, is not death but a birth – the emergence of a people liberated from the maternal womb that nourishes yet imprisons, toward a new, adult, and independent life, free from resentment, conscious of memory, and carrying its own traditions but journeying toward a new, free land, to teach us all how to be no longer slaves to our history but narrators of ourselves. (2023, 27; transl. by the Author)

Figure 3 Cover of *La cucina ebraica del futuro* (Damocle, 2023)

While for the second menu, connected to the spring season and the feast of *Pesach* (Passover), Bravetti made a completely vegetarian choice, in the case of the winter *Shabbat Beschallach* he took a different route. He engaged with the most humble ingredients of the Venetian lagoon, respecting seasonality and locality to create his *Frisensalmastro*, in one of his characteristically witty and thought-provoking puns, a fusion of the traditional, enigmatic name with *salmastro*, the brackish waters of the lagoon.

> Instead of focusing on the memory of the past from the original recipe, I tried to look toward the future – the threat of the looming climate catastrophe but also the hope that we can somehow avert it. (Bravetti 2023, 50)

The chef had already reinterpreted traditional religious foods such as *castradina*, a mutton dish eaten in Venice on the very popular Catholic Feast of Madonna della Salute, celebrated on the 21 November to commemorate the end of the plague epidemic in 1630-31. Once a simple food supplied by Dalmatians in times of penury, today *castradina* relies on meat imported from New Zealand with a heavy ecological footprint. Bravetti shifted all the traditional meat ingredients of *frisensal* toward the briny flavors typical of the lagoon: "what Venetians call *freschìn*, that smell of stagnant or marshy water, like the fish market when it's closed" (50). Reclaiming the poorest fish, which are also at risk of extinction due to climate change, Bravetti made a fish broth and raw mullet meatballs. Another signature element of his cuisine, typical of the lagoon landscape but nearly absent from Venetian cooking, is seaweed. Including seaweeds in *Frisensalmastro* was a paradoxical act: first because traditional Venetian cuisine was much less based on fish than today's restaurant menus might suggest (Pes 2007), and secondly because the lagoon's seaweed is too polluted to use directly and has to be imported from healthier ecosystems. However, seaweed represents a possible and desirable future:

> If we were capable of redesigning our relationship with the landscape, we could use seaweed, and it thus becomes a stimulus to imagine a lagoon emerging from environmental threats. (Bravetti 2023, 51; cf. Pezzola 2024)

With powdered seaweed, the tagliatelle in the recipe turned green, and the dish was decorated with a composition of lagoon herbs and samphire:

> Instead of immersing ourselves in the Red Sea, we immerse ourselves in the Venice lagoon, hoping that it too will transform and lead us to a future free from environmental threats. (Bravetti 2023, 51)

Venetian foodways reflect centuries of adaptation to environmental constraints, offering insights for sustainability today. The city's historical reliance on the lagoon for fish, salt, and other resources underscores the importance of localized, ecologically attuned food systems. Venice also illustrates the challenges of balancing cultural heritage with environmental responsibility, particularly in the face of climate change and overtourism.

Field studies of Venetian foodscapes, combined with dialogues with local food professionals and activists, reveal the tensions between preserving traditions and embracing innovation. Our Jewish Venetian case study highlights how local practices can inform global discussions on food sustainability, and by way of conclusion, I draw on Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus's observation:

> Insofar as Jewish food rules and rituals have some sort of relationship – direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious – to sacred Jewish texts and traditions, they are a kind of 'culinary midrash'. Midrash is a Jewish mode of talking about and applying texts creatively and imaginatively to re-'tell' (the medium need not be restricted to words) new cultural-historical situations, informed by the interpreter's new contemporary ethical and cultural sensitivities. (2024, 3)

Beit Venezia's project on the future of Jewish food can be considered a culinary midrash on our precarious environmental condition. Bravetti's *Frisensalmastro* and his other recipes may not be easily replicated by inexperienced hands, and *La cucina ebraica del futuro* was not conceived as the typical cookbook. It was created to foster conversations between Jewish thought, Venetian traditions, and environmental ethics, inviting readers to reflect on how their own food choices intersect with cultural and ecological sustainability. It is offered as a contribution to the fascinating mosaic emerging from the project of a Venice food Atlas (De Marchi et al. 2023). And it is a journey that encourages us to revisit all traditions, to value their meaning, and to have the courage to transform them, reminding us, as Safran Foer says, that we can change the world before breakfast.

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