

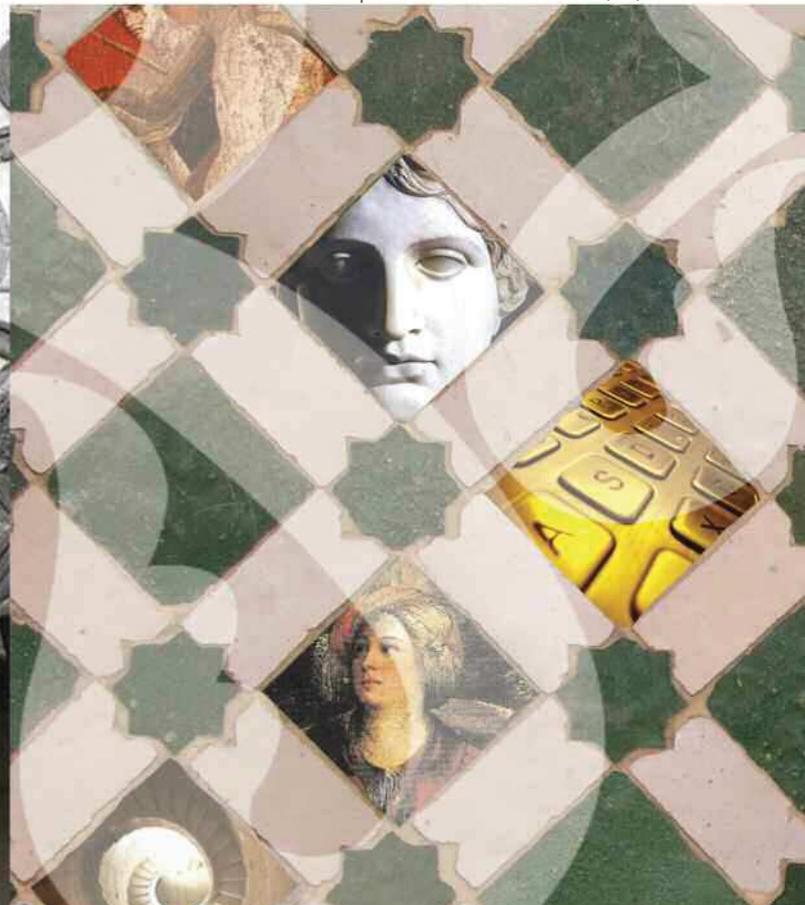


Centro Universitario Europeo  
per i Beni Culturali  
Ravello

# Territori della Cultura

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Centro Universitario Europeo  
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# Sommario

<b>Comitato di redazione</b>	<b>5</b>
La nuova sfida di RAVELLO LAB Alfonso Andria	<b>6</b>
Beni Culturali e conflitti armati Pietro Graziani	<b>8</b>
<b>Conoscenza del patrimonio culturale</b>	
Maria Rita Sanzi Di Mino Il sacro e l'ambiente nel mondo antico	<b>12</b>
Claudio La Rocca Lo scavo archeologico di Piazza Epiro a Roma	<b>16</b>
Lina Sabino Maiori (SA), Complesso Abbaziale di Santa Maria de Olearia	<b>20</b>
Roger Lefèvre L'enseignement des sciences du patrimoine culturel dans un monde en changement: une Conférence à Varsovie et un Cours à Ravello en 2011	<b>26</b>
Massimo Pistacchi Storia della fonografia	<b>28</b>
<b>Cultura come fattore di sviluppo</b>	
Stefania Chirico, Giuseppe Pennisi Strategie gestionali per la valorizzazione delle risorse culturali: il caso di Ravenna	<b>38</b>
Teresa Gagliardi Costruire in Costiera Amalfitana: ieri, oggi e domani?	<b>54</b>
Fabio Pollice, Giulia Urso Le città come fucine culturali. Per una lettura critica delle politiche di rigenerazione urbana	<b>64</b>
Sandro Polci Cult economy: un nuovo/antico driver per i territori minori	<b>72</b>
<b>Metodi e strumenti del patrimonio culturale</b>	
Maurizio Apicella From the Garden of the Hesperides to the Amalfi Coast. The culture of lemons	<b>84</b>
Matilde Romito Artiste straniera a Positano fra gli anni Venti e gli anni Sessanta	<b>90</b>
Luciana Bordoni Tecnologie e valori culturali	<b>106</b>
Antonio Gisolfi La risoluzione del labirinto	<b>112</b>
Simone Bozzato Territorio, formazione scolastica e innovazione. Attuazione, nella provincia di Salerno, di un modello applicativo finalizzato a ridurre il <i>digital divide</i>	<b>116</b>

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Maurizio Apicella

*Maurizio Apicella,  
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# From the Garden of the Hesperides to the Amalfi Coast The culture of lemons

## Lemon gardens

In the winter, lemons on trellises wrapped in straw or nets and in the spring, deep green leaves intertwined with white flowers: humanity and agriculture distinguish the Amalfi Coast, and together, give it extraordinary aesthetic value. The cultivation of lemons represents the cultural, economic and scenic identity of the Coast. The great demand for these lemons resulted not only in turning much of this steep, rocky terrain into terraced gardens, but, at the same time, this cultivation helped to safeguard and protect this territory, making it recognizable to tourists who immediately identify this singular agriculture that clings to the soil above the sea.

The Amalfi Coast's landscape is part of the historical and cultural identity of the people who live there and it is also a "gift" for the tourists who enjoy its vistas, its fragrances, its cuisine. The Amalfi Coast is so particular that it cannot be mistaken for any other place in the world and much of its success in the travel industry is thanks to the lemon gardens that the colossal efforts of the men and women living there created out of its impervious stony terrain.

This area has become one of the places that people dream of visiting at least once in their lifetime, for the beauty of the landscape and for the area's historic significance, factors of great importance for today's tourist industry increasingly in search of places that respect both environmental and cultural values.



*L'articolo è tratto da:  
Ezio Falcone e Apicella Maurizio  
Illustrazioni di Sally Spector  
**Il limone della Costa d'Amalfi**  
**The lemon of the Amalfi Coast**  
**Ricette Storia Arte**  
**Recipes History Art***

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## Maiori lemons, world famous for their delicious flavor

During the 1800's, the ever growing demand for lemons by foreign markets, especially in England and North America, was

*Tissue paper for wrapping lemons  
of the Amalfi Coast, early 1900's,  
G. Liguori, Erchie (Salerno)*



particularly beneficial for the Amalfi Coast. By the end of the century, new developments in communications brought greater speed and efficiency which in turn led to increased production and exporting became more regular and dependable. Local growers entered a market that, until then, had been monopolized by merchants in Genoa who worked almost exclusively in Sorrento and Sicily.



*"Under the Lemons", Amalfi Coast, postcard printed by E. Mahler, Rothenburg, Germany, early 1900's: Heliograph no.16 – Heliogravure Obernetter, Munich*

Records and registries indicate a rapid expansion of lemon cultivation, especially in the area of Maiori<sup>1</sup>, which served mostly for export with only a minimal part devoted to national and local markets.

The possibility of having more than one crop a year permitted growers to obtain a larger piece of the continually growing market. In addition, the Coast's terrain is extremely fertile, its soil very rich in nutritive elements left by volcanic eruptions, which give these lemons their unique flavor and fragrance<sup>2</sup>.

At first, lemons were grown only for their ornamental value. The discovery in 1747<sup>3</sup> that they could prevent scurvy, the disease caused by the lack of Vitamin C that afflicted sailors all over the world, led to this fruit's commercial cultivation.

Thanks to this medicinal power, in the late 1700's the British Admiralty included lemon juice in food rations for seamen. This produced a new demand for citrus and thus this product began to be traded in the principal ports of the Mediterranean. At the same time, lemons were also being used to prepare refreshing drinks, first made in Italy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The first carbonated drinks with lemon were created in the late 1800's (the Abbondio Company in the Piedmont and the Verga Company in Lombardy were the earliest producers) as well as the first drink using citron (now called "acqua di cedro" or citron water). The first fruit drinks appeared in the 1930's, containing real citrus juice, such as orange juice and lemonade.

The export of lemons was profitable. Steam powered English ships arrived even during the winter when the seas were not always calm.



*"Do you want lemons?", Amalfi Coast, postcard printed by E. Mahler, Rothenburg, Germany, early 1900's: Heliograph no.13, Heliogravure Obernetter, Munich*

<sup>1</sup> "The name "lemon of Maiori" comes from the fact that it is cultivated mainly in this town, although it has spread along the rest of the Amalfi Coast and is also found in Sorrento. Of medium size, elongated in form, its skin is thin and its pulp is juicy, quite acidic and very fragrant. It is exported in great quantity to London". From the First Italian Gastronomic Guide, Touring Club d'Italia, 1931.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to commercial success and international fame, the Amalfi "sfusato" lemon shares certain features with that of Sorrento: late harvest (from March to October) and cultivation on terraced gardens planted on steep limestone cliffs which distinguish the local landscape.

<sup>3</sup> In 1747 the Scottish surgeon, James Lind, carried out the first scientific study in this area.



*"Amalfi lemons – view from the Grand Hotel dei Cappuccini, Amalfi", postcard printed by A. Fusco Dipino, Amalfi early 1900's*



In the late 1880's, 50% of local production was exported to the United States, partly thanks to the absence of protectionism: in 1832 there were no excise duties on imported lemons and an economic treaty of 1846 encouraged their export. However, within a short

<sup>4</sup> A protective tariff, called Dingly, was imposed to defend California and Florida citrus fruit from foreign competition.

<sup>5</sup> In a bit more than two decades, from 1860 to 1890, the amount of terrain cultivated increased ten-fold, most of it being in the area of Maiori, with about 40% of the total area.

<sup>6</sup> These canals provide a constant, controlled flow of water supplied by rain as well as underground springs.

time this situation changed radically and the export market collapsed. In 1897 the duty on lemon imports rose from 2.75 lire to 11 lire for one "quintale", or about 220 pounds and by 1909 it had risen to 16,5 lire<sup>4</sup>.

The high price of lemons, with maximum values around 100 lire for one thousand lemons (about 250 kilograms) made this crop extremely attractive to farmers, who abandoned others such as olive trees, grape vines and fruit trees. New areas were terraced in order to increase the land devoted to lemons which provoked a major transformation of this territory as agricultural expansion onto steep, rocky, seemingly inaccessible cliffs dramatically changed many parts of the Coast<sup>5</sup>.

This enormous intervention helped safeguard the terrain against damage and destruction caused by hydro-geological factors and created the Amalfi Coast's singular, distinctive landscape. It is very difficult to imagine this Coast without its fascinating, fragrant lemon gardens: tiny pieces of land enclosed and reinforced by thick stone walls, connected by steep stairways carved out of stone, irrigated by ingeniously constructed canals<sup>6</sup>.



*"Crating lemons on the Amalfi Coast, Maiori", G. Capone, postcard printed by A. Brangi, Palermo, early 1900's*

### **The myth of Masaniello captures the lemon market**

A product so precious and delicate required great care in harvesting it, carrying it, packaging it and transporting it to distant markets. Women played a major role in each of these phases, from carrying the heavy baskets made of chestnut wood on their shoulders – due to their canvas lining these baskets were called "bonboniere", or "candy boxes" – to selecting the fruit and arranging it in shipping containers. Because the lemons



were carefully chosen by hand for high quality, it is not surprising that finger nails were almost obsessively controlled, for they had to be very short, and thin cotton gloves had to be worn to avoid damaging the fruit when handling it: the lemons had to cross the ocean and arrive in perfect condition, preserving those qualities for which they were so famous<sup>7</sup>.

Nothing was left to chance: shipments were labelled indicating their exact destination, little advertising posters and tissue paper wrapping were created for the lemons and specially cut metal stencils were used to write identifying words and signs on the shipping crates. The lemons were carefully selected according to quality and size, wrapped one by one in plain, soft tissue paper and meticulously arranged in crates of varying dimensions made of poplar wood<sup>8</sup>. Only the lemons on the top layer were wrapped in brightly colored, decorated tissue. Before the case was closed, some companies inserted a "fodera", or lining, a sheet of paper with the label of the exporter which completely covered the layer of lemons. In addition, to be sure that buyers would not mistakenly think that the lemons in the layers below were of lesser quality, the words, in English, "Uniform quality from top to bottom" were written on the case.

Work was highly specialized and was organized into specific tasks. When preparing the shipping cases, the fruit was not weighed; instead, packers sang "...one handful makes five lemons and every 105 handfuls are counted as 100, because the buyer always gets five extra for every hundred lemons..." The colored tissue paper used to wrap the top layer of fruit made those lemons seem even more precious and added to their value when up for auction. This packaging was one of the first examples of advertising publicity, serving the double function of identifying the producer and of guaranteeing the quality of the merchandise.

When auctions were held, the



*"Loading lemons on ship on the Amalfi Coast, Maiori", G. Capone, postcard printed by Modiano, Milano, early 1900's*

<sup>7</sup> In the early 1900's the lemon of Maiori was quoted on the New York Stock Exchange, with a price for each individual lemon.

<sup>8</sup> Poplar wood was used not only because it was economical, light and easy to work with: it also contributed to the fruits' ripening process and conservation. Crates were constantly produced and were often not reused.



*"Port of Maiori: loading lemons onto boats, to be then transferred to ships anchored nearby", F. Lusi, photograph printed by Basilio Sarno, Maiori, early 1900's*



*Port of Maiori. Anchored ships waiting for their cargo of lemons, postcard printed by G. Amura, Maiori, early 1900's*



advertising posters were exhibited. There was one for every place that lemons were sent to, showing something representative of it, and these individual images became identifying icons that were also a form of publicity. The labels, posters, etc. dating

from the 1800's to 1940 that accompanied the simple crates of citrus fruit tell an extraordinary story, through images and design, of our past taste and social evolution, as if on a voyage through history, art and graphic design<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> A product's symbolic sphere triggers mythological considerations: for this reason, the images used represented indigenous archetypes, such as seen on the poster of the Ciampa Company which promoted Maiori lemons through the historic figure of Masaniello. (Masaniello, nickname of Tommaso Aniello (1620-1647), extremely intelligent though uneducated fishmonger who led Neapolitans in a revolt against the Spanish ruling the city.) Symbols served in the past in much the same way as they do today.

<sup>10</sup> After World War I, the predominance of Italian lemons was threatened by numerous new producers whose introduction into this market created a new and difficult situation for the Amalfi Coast.

<sup>11</sup> After World War II, southern Italy continued to enjoy commercial pre-eminence in certain products: oil, wine, lemons, oranges and essence of bergamot and of jasmine continued to be the "stars" of Italy's exports in Europe and overseas, and were far more attractive than shoes and parmesan cheese are today.

### **A future equal to its splendid past**

The "sfusato" lemon: the Amalfi Coast's most original and enthralling postcard

IN the early 1900's, in addition to problems relating to exporting<sup>10</sup>, overproduction made it more difficult to market this product<sup>11</sup>. This crisis forced people less economically secure to emigrate to North America, especially to the area around New York City<sup>12</sup>, and to other places in Europe. Where once lemons had been exported, entire families were now "exported". Sometimes these Italian immigrants were associated with their native products, as in Switzerland, where they were called "zydrooneschittler" or "lemon pickers".

Lemon growing has been of enormous social and economic importance, a tradition that continues to this day. Its future depends on how much and how well this product's unique characteristics are made known, in order to respond to the present demand of consumers for quality. One must also consider the very significant role of the landscape, its terraced gar-



*Port of Amalfi. Women carrying baskets of lemons to be loaded on ships. Épstacard printed by Bidery, Naples, early 1900's*



dens of deep green leaves, golden-yellow fruit, the fragrant orange blossoms, which are a priceless legacy. Safeguarding the cultivation of lemons goes beyond just saving an agricultural tradition: it becomes a model for the preservation of a dominant component of the Amalfi Coast's landscape, so present in the collective imagination of Europeans and North Americans.



The language of this landscape, its cognitive-aesthetic qualities, are of symbolic and communicative value, a true gift for the visitor. Without the typical, terraced gardens, without the dramatic contrasts between the blue sea and the yellow fruit with its deep green leaves, a triumph of color exalted by the sparkling sunlight, this landscape, among the world's most beautiful, would be less unique, less breathtaking and these factors are all further enriched by the area's great historic importance<sup>13</sup>.

This remarkable environment will remain intact only if these terraces and their cultivation are not abandoned, only if the lemons continue to be harvested, especially in the areas which are more difficult to get to, making the transport of the fruit more expensive. Recognition must be given to those growers, past and present, who, through their labor and tenacity helped, and continue to, conserve this landscape and protect this precious territory<sup>14</sup>.

The lemon of the Amalfi Coast recently was awarded the title IGP ("Indicazione Geografica Protetta," reserved for quality products which are guaranteed authentic only if they are grown in a very specific, limited area), a prestigious distinction which indicates its value and uniqueness: unfortunately, today it must fight unlawful competition from "false" Amalfi lemons. It may be hard to imagine but the lemons in our shopping bags could be "Amalfi" lemons grown in Turkey<sup>15</sup>!

*Erchie. Selecting the lemons and wrapping them in tissue paper before crating them.*

*Postcard printed by N. Caterinici, Erchie. Stampa Sansaini, Roma. Early 1900's*

<sup>12</sup> Significant numbers of natives have left the Amalfi Coast, emigrating to North and South America as well as to several European destinations.

<sup>13</sup> It is not only such features as color etc. that fascinate the countless tourists, because the lemon gardens give this area other important benefits, including defence of the territory.

<sup>14</sup> In spite of its great historic and cultural value, the lemon cultivation along the Amalfi Coast is facing a serious crisis due to various factors: high production costs that are not reflected in the (too) low sales price; competition from extensive plantations in Sicily and outside Europe; difficulty in finding qualified workers.

<sup>15</sup> "Nuovi gusti e prezzi più bassi, mai così alta l'importazione di frutta e verdura", in *La Stampa di Torino*, 22 settembre, 2007. ("...new tastes and lower prices, more imported fruit and vegetables than ever before...", in *La Stampa of Turin*, 22 September, 2007.