



# Really Eth(n)ic

Waste management and multicultural catering in Milan



This report has been drawn up by Urban Genoma / EStà  
with the support of AMSA and Novamont.

edited by  
Rocco Ronza e Chiara Maranzana Urban Genoma / EStà

with the collaboration of  
Massimiliano Lepratti EStà  
Maria Matilde Benzoni, Mario De Benedittis, Roberta Garruccio, Bettina Mottura, Letizia Osti  
Dipartimento di Scienze della mediazione linguistica e di studi interculturali  
Università degli Studi di Milano

graphic design  
Marco Marangoni e Marco Vedoà EStà

English translation  
Shanti Evans

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# Really Eth(n)ic

## Waste management and multicultural catering in Milan

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*Really Eth(n)ic* is an initiative by Urban Genoma / EStà with the support of AMSA and Novamont, aimed at boosting the separation and collection of waste from businesses run by ethnic minorities through an integrated multicultural approach to the services handling garbage



## Danilo Vismara

### Head of special projects, AMSA

For years AMSA and the City of Milan have been pursuing the objective of improving the quality of the services offered to families, business or public bodies and the management of garbage collection oriented toward recycling. As a consequence AMSA is increasingly seeking the involvement and cooperation of its users, for the eventual utilization of the garbage is essentially dependent on the correctness of the separation carried out in the home or at a commercial operation.

The project *Really Eth(n)ic* stems in fact from observation that the refuse bags and containers put out by some restaurants run by foreigners presented mistakes in the sorting that could be connected with linguistic difficulties (for example in understanding the procedures and the municipal regulations) and with a cultural distance between people coming from countries where the garbage dump is the only means of waste disposal and the new approaches underlying the European standards for the handling of garbage, based on the principles of the circular economy (waste is a resource to be reused in production processes). Taking this as its starting point, AMSA has participated in the experimentation of a new formula of relationship with users in order to explain not just the procedures for separation of the various categories of garbage, but also the reasons and aims behind them. The dialogue has resulted in a change in the behavior of the people involved, even affecting their choices in the purchase of packaging or the location of refuse containers on the premises.



## Andrea Vecci

### Chief executive officer Està

Ethnic catering has a fundamental role in creating the diversity and vitality that we see in our cities today. It is an economic activity conducted by that part of the immigrant population which has chosen to settle in Italy and make it their home. In Milan, where many of these businesses are run to more than acceptable standards, the time has come to take a further step forward in order to maximize the benefits that this diversity brings. *Really Eth(n)ic*, the experiment that you will find described in this report, is a project aimed at forging ties between different stakeholders who are still distant from one another and have difficulties in communication, as well as to consolidate the role played by the city as a provider of services and developer of strategies for integration.

The initiative has seen the involvement of technical partners that have adopted a participatory and multidisciplinary approach. Alongside with experts from the field of environmental technology, experts in sociology and linguistic-cultural mediation were also involved: an approach capable both of involving business owners in achieving results oriented toward change and of developing means of interpretation and communication that can be replicated elsewhere, while taking the conditions of the context into account. The City has the authority to ensure both that its own goals of inclusion are achieved and that public services are improved. A multicultural approach can generate highly effective place-based policies, able to grasp different needs, win trust in local institutions and turn them into a force for the promotion of cohesion and competitiveness.



## Rocco Ronza

### Scientific coordinator, Urban Genoma

The *Really Eth(n)ic* project has seized the opportunity of an intervention linked to the production of a “common good” such as the separation and collection of garbage to help a local institution like AMSA get into direct contact with the foreign communities present in Milan. The company’s need to improve the performance of ethnic restaurants and takeaways, finding a more effective line of attack than the imposition of fines, has stimulated experimentation with a different approach from the traditional ones. Instead of relying on the mediation of local associations or on top-down strategies involving communication campaigns on a vast scale, the project has chosen to utilize linguistic-cultural mediators trained at a Milanese university, supported by representatives of the company.

The result has been a sometimes exciting foray into two of the oldest and best-known “ethnic districts” in Milan: the “Chinatown” of Via Sarpi-Via Canonica and the “Casbah” of Porta Venezia. Getting the different worlds that coexist in the city to speak to each other has helped to solve some problems that are quite banal, but decisive in unleashing the participatory potential of the people running these businesses, creating social cohesion. But it has also made it possible to view what was already known in a new light. For this reason, the report concludes with a brief history of the two neighborhoods involved in the project, in which the legacy of the past is interwoven and melded with what is taking shape under our eyes.



## Introduction

The separation and collection of refuse is an area in which the challenges of the circular economy meet and are intertwined with those of social and cultural integration in the multiethnic city. The hypothesis at the base of the *Really Eth(n)ic* project – conceived by Economia e Sostenibilità/ESTà and Urban Genoma in collaboration with AMSA (Azienda Milanese Servizi Ambientali) and Novamont to boost the contribution made by ethnic restaurants – is that when it is a question of objectives that are widely shared, like those connected with the environment, the problem posed by cultural differences is not so much one of conflict between different values as that of obtaining more or less easy and “cheap” access to linguistically and culturally specific social relations and channels of information, something on which depends the circulation of the knowledge required in order to “do the right thing.”

In other words, the assumption has been that the owners and managers of ethnic restaurants and takeaways were as willing, generally speaking, to play their part in the separation and collection of waste as their Milanese-Italian counterparts (not just to reduce the risk of penalties, but also as a demonstration of their full integration into the urban and local community). The problem, rather, lay in the particular difficulty that people who come from remote countries and cultures have in inserting themselves into a local web of communicative exchanges. Without that, it becomes very hard to follow rules that are by their nature fairly complicated and often changeable, owing to the continual evolution of green technologies (such as the recent introduction of bioplastics).

The presence of over 260,000 “official” residents of foreign citizenship, equal to almost 20% of the population, has been good for the cultural vivacity and international image of Milan, but it has also added a new dimension to the great challenge on which winning the battle for environmental quality in any urban community depends: that of acting together. In recent years, while our attention was monopolized by the emergency linked to the influx of refugees and the security concerns raised by international terrorism, the foreign component of Milan’s population has continued to grow, putting down ever deeper roots. So it should come as no surprise that, while the food industry has been carving an ever gre-



ater role for itself in the profile of the city, ethnic catering has emerged as one of the most visible signs of its new multicultural identity. So it was inevitable that when the company responsible for handling garbage identified the restaurant sector as the one offering potentially the most interesting margins for further improvement in the levels of separation and collection, the spotlight would also be turned on the ever broader and more diversified world of catering in the hands of foreign citizens.

The means chosen to accomplish this has been linguistic-cultural mediation, a methodology that in recent years has moved on from the early experiments carried out by the social services with ethnic associations to being taught in academic courses. Associating the expertise in environmental sciences and technologies of the AMSA staff with the linguistic and cultural skills of young mediators trained at university and honed with traineeships in the countries of origin of the restaurateurs involved in the project has been successful beyond expectations. In the case of almost all the businesses included in the sample, the removal of the main obstacles to communication that rendered the management of separation and collection “complicated” resulted in immediate progress, revealing a potential interest in and openness to collaboration that will need to be cultivated on a wider scale, using similar methods, but certainly offers grounds for hope.

The information gathered through preparatory research, interviews, on-the-spot investigations has, in addition, made it possible to present an unprecedented picture of two neighborhoods of Milan (Via Sarpi-Via Canonica and Porta Venezia-Stazione Centrale) that are often in the news, but in reality very little known to “ethnic” Italians. Catering, an activity that by its nature involves culture, economics and social relations, with one foot in the private sphere and the other in the public one, is central to the image that Milan has chosen to present of itself for some time now. Thus it has proved to be a door allowing us to enter new worlds, at one and the same time close by and far away and still to a great extent mysterious, that now inhabit the space of our city and to find out how they are enriching its heritage. Enjoy the journey and the discovery.



## How the project was born

The figure is mind-boggling: almost 700,000 metric tons a year. That is the amount of refuse handled in Milan by AMSA, which recycles over 60% of it. But more can be done. The Azienda Milanese Servizi Ambientali, which monitors the behavior of apartment blocks, businesses and large communities on a daily basis, has identified catering as an area in which it is possible to intervene in order to increase the volume of separation and collection because as a whole it represents a significant proportion of the service's customer base. Special attention has been paid to ethnic restaurants: the impression is that problems of communication and identification linked to cultural background are impeding the realization of a "hidden" potential of participation from which the whole city could benefit. However good their intentions, foreign restaurateurs, unconnected with the social fabric and local culture and often not very conversant with the Italian language, encounter difficulties in complying with the rules on separation and collection. The project *Really Eth(n)ic* has chosen to

tackle the question in an innovative way. A pilot program was formulated to be tried out in two areas of the city with a high concentration of ethnic restaurants. The objective was to improve understanding of the rules on waste separation and collection and the channels of direct communication between the company and its restaurateur clients. After picking a sample of "non-Italian-run" businesses, the project team, with the help of lecturers of Arab and Chinese language and culture, history and sociology at the School of Linguistic and Cultural Mediation at Milan University (Sesto San Giovanni campus), selected and trained two postgraduate students specialized in the languages and cultures predominant among those restaurateurs.

The result has been a journey of exploration into areas of Milan still little known to the majority of its native citizens and still not really included in the images that the city presents of itself. The encounters have not only favored a more efficient and thorough dis-



semination of information on the garbage collection service but permitted mutual discoveries. By the end of the project, the company responsible for garbage collection had become more familiar in two "ethnically marked" neighborhoods that have since long time been part of the urban fabric of Milan – and which, for their part, have become less mysterious.

*"The difficulty of expressing themselves in Italian, especially for the smaller concerns, prevents them from asking for the containers they need"*





## Methodology

The project was carried out in four phases: identification of the restaurants; signing up their owners or managers; analysis of the waste; communication of the results and consignment of the certificate of participation.

### Phase 1

Ethnic catering in Milan has a diversified spatial distribution. In some cases, for example the Egyptian-owned pizzerias and the kebab shops run by Turks and Kurds or by Egyptians, the degree of spatial segregation is low and they are evenly spread throughout the city; in other cases the catering activities linked with one or more communities are concentrated in well-defined zones. AMSA focused its attention on areas where penalties had already been imposed or reports had been received of problems connected, in one way or another, with the “foreign” background of the businesses. The proximity of restaurants of the same kind, moreover, was considered useful in minimizing the time taken by the team to move around. The choice fell on two ethnic zones *par excellence*, the “Chinatown” of Via Sarpi-Via Canonica and the “Casbah” in the old Lazzaretto area, between Corso Buenos Aires and the Stazione Centrale, and this proved productive. On the one hand, in fact, it allowed the operators of AMSA to open channels of communication and information with cohesive “worlds” and social networks that are relatively closed toward the outside; on the other, it has helped to debunk some stereotypes deeply rooted in the city’s public discourse – such as the exclusive character of the Chinese presence in the Via Sarpi area or the Arabization and blight of that of the former Lazzaretto.

This survey, unlike the previous ones, which were based on lists of businesses provided by the Chamber of Commerce, relied on lists of restaurateurs who utilized services of daily garbage collection, updated by AMSA. The ethnic identity of each business was subject to verification in the field, giving priority to the self-definition of the people involved and the linguistic-cultural identity of the kitchen and dining-room staff (on whom depends the efficiency of the separa-



tion of the garbage), even when different from that of the owners or from kind of food on offer. Thus a number of Japanese, Korean or Oriental restaurants were reclassified as Chinese and several African ones as Eritrean or Eritreo-Ethiopian. The preference of the interlocutors was also respected when it came to the choice of language or languages used in the interviews. Particular scrutiny was reserved for those who had already been fined, on the assumption that they might prove more receptive to forms of communication aimed at reducing the causes of such penalties. In the light of the instructions, the explorative nature of the project and the qualitative objectives of the intervention, 100 business were selected among which 20, spread over the two zones were to be engaged.

The logo of the project was produced in Italian and in four other languages. The pun on the word “sacco” proved untranslatable: in French and English the play on “ethnic” and “ethic” was maintained; in Chinese and Arabic recourse was made to similar concepts.





The ethnic restaurants involved in the project are located in the zone of Via Sarpi-Via Canonica and in that of the former Lazzaretto, between Porta Venezia and the Stazione Centrale.





Milano, marzo 2019

Egregio Esercente,

desideriamo informarla che il suo ristorante è stato selezionato per partecipare ad una campagna di informazione e sensibilizzazione sulla differenziazione dei rifiuti, in collaborazione con Amsa e l'Associazione Està (Economia e Sostenibilità).

Si tratta di un progetto che mira alla collaborazione attiva con gli operatori del settore della ristorazione nelle zone Stazione Centrale/Corso Buenos Aires/via Paolo Sarpi per avviare un processo di formazione e ricerca sullo svolgimento della raccolta differenziata e i risultati ottenuti. A tal fine abbiamo la necessità di visionare e documentare le modalità di separazione dei rifiuti svolte all'interno del locale immondizia della vostra attività e di effettuare un'analisi merceologica dei rifiuti prodotti senza alcuna finalità sanzionatoria.

Tutti questi dati saranno raccolti con la collaborazione di Està e del Dipartimento di Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale dell'Università degli Studi di Milano.

Al termine del progetto le verrà rilasciato un attestato di partecipazione come riconoscimento della collaborazione e dell'impegno profuso.

La ringraziamo per l'attenzione e confidiamo nella sua collaborazione.

Cordiali saluti.

Amsa
Il Responsabile Operativo

Està
Il Presidente



The letter sent by Amsa and Està to the proprietors of the ethnic restaurants selected for the interviews was intended to clarify the objectives of the project and to inform them about its modalities and phases. Participants were promised a certificate of participation as a recognition of their efforts.

UN SACCO ETNICO 分类到位 服务到位
Perché fare la raccolta differenziata
I rifiuti che separi, grazie al Sistema Conai - Consorzi, vengono riciclati e diventano altri prodotti, limitando così l'uso di materie prime.

Il vetro va nel cassonetto verde 玻璃制品投入绿色垃圾桶
Cosa mettere: bottiglie e vasetti.
Cosa NON mettere: piatti e tazzine in ceramica, lampadine ad incandescenza e a basso consumo, tubi al neon, specchi, contenitori in vetroceramica (tipo pirex) o ceramica, bicchieri, caraffe e oggetti in cristallo, sacchetti di plastica.

UN SACCO ETNICO 分类到位 服务到位
Perché fare la raccolta differenziata
I rifiuti che separi, grazie al Sistema Conai - Consorzi, vengono riciclati e diventano altri prodotti, limitando così l'uso di materie prime.

Il vetro va nel cassonetto verde الزجاج يوضع في الحوية الخضراء
ما الذي يمكن وضعه: الزجاج والعلب والبواتق والواقي.
Cosa NON mettere: piatti e tazzine in ceramica, lampadine ad incandescenza e a basso consumo, tubi al neon, specchi, contenitori in vetroceramica (tipo pirex) o ceramica, bicchieri, caraffe e oggetti in cristallo, sacchetti di plastica.



## Phase 2

To involve the selected restaurateurs in the project, AMSA's representatives were supported by young linguistic mediators. The students drew up guidelines for the interviews and prepared forms to be filled out in order to gather and organize the information, as well as material that could be used to illustrate the most critical points of the procedure of separation and disposal of waste in Arabic and in Mandarin Chinese. Finally, with the aid of experts in communication and graphic design, the logo of the project was created, with the production of one version in Italian and of other, bilingual ones with the addition of Mandarin, English, Arabic and French (on the assumption, which later proved unfounded, that the latter might prove useful in the former Lazzaretto area). All these languages, with the exception of French, were then utilized to draw up personal certificates of participation in the project, to be issued to the restaurateurs as a token of appreciation.

Two meetings were scheduled: the first, involving 57 restaurateurs, was intended to explain the aims and

modalities of the project and to obtain agreement to take part in the subsequent phases. At the second, the same team conducted 20 interviews with as many owners of the restaurant (or an employee or member of their family delegated to take their place). In addition to gathering information on some aspects of the management of the business (origin and linguistic background of the staff, type of customers, procedures of waste collection and separation), the interviewers had the objective of being shown the garbage bags and getting people to express any doubts they had relating

***“Translating and simplifying the terminology works, but care has to be taken about misunderstandings: the expression “organic” for example is not very clear in Chinese”***



The window stickers given to the restaurateurs at the end of the project.

to the rules and procedures of separation, offering answers and explanations in exchange.

## Phase 3

Each restaurateur had been asked to put out, on an agreed date, specially pre-marked bags for the disposal of plastic and metal, organic and unsorted waste, to be used for a product analysis, i.e. a particularized analysis of the composition of the garbage in order to identify errors in the separation. The results were then to be shared and discussed with the restaurateurs at a subsequent meeting – without imposing, under any circumstances, penalties on the owner of the business.

## Phase 4

At the third and last meeting the results of the product analysis were revealed and any progress made with respect to the situation encountered at the first inspection stressed, with a further explanation of errors in separation still made. As a mark of the cooperation and public acknowledgment of the effort made, each restaurateur was given a diploma of participation and several stickers with the logo of the project to place in the window, in monolingual or bilingual versions, according to preference. Finally the restaurateurs were encouraged to contact the representatives of the company should they have any further doubts and to share the knowledge they had acquired with their neighbors and with other businesses in their respective social and family networks.

***“No one was using compostable bags for the organic waste. Many acquired them after our visit. We have often found errors made by people thinking they were doing the right thing”***



CONSORZIO ITALIANO COMPOSTATORI

Monitoraggio qualità rifiuto: indagine merceologica -N° **358 /19**

COMMITTENTE	Novamont S.p.A.
LUOGO MONITORAGGI	AMSA SILLA 1 - Via Lucio Cornelio Silla, 249, 20153 Milano MI
DATA CONFERIMENTO	17 aprile 2019
DATA MONITORAGGIO	17 aprile 2019
PRODUTTORE	██████████
CODICE CER	200108 rifiuti biodegradabili di cucine e mense
METODICA DI INDAGINE	All B DGRV 568/05
COORDINAMENTO MONITORAGGI	██████████ (CIC)

TOTALE RIFIUTO MONITORATO (Kg)	13,43		
MATERIALE COMPOSTABILE (MC) (Kg)	13,08		
		Kg	% del MC
di cui:	Umido	12,70	97,09
	Rifiuto alimentare evitabile	0,30	2,29
	Bioplastiche	0,00	0,00
	Carta imballi	0,00	0,00
	Altra carta	0,08	0,61
MATERIALE NON COMPOSTABILE (MNC) (Kg)	0,35		
		Kg	% del MNC
di cui:	Plastica imballi	0,00	0,00
	Altra plastica	0,34	97,70
	Metalli	0,00	0,00
	Vetro	0,00	0,00
	Altro	0,01	2,30

**MNC - Materiale non compostabile (% sul totale) 2,6**

Li, 2 maggio 2019

Sede Legale: P.zza San Bernardo, 109 - 00187 ROMA Tel. 06 485238 - PI 01813631205 - CF 01403130287 - REA N. 104022  
 Sede Operativa: Via Dalmazia, 2 - 24047 Treviglio (BG) Tel. 0363 301503 - Fax 0363 1801012  
 E-mail: cic@compost.it URL: <http://www.compost.it/> <http://www.compostabile.com>



The summary sheets of the results of the product analysis of the waste collected from each business were discussed with the restaurateurs at the end of the project.



## Steps forward

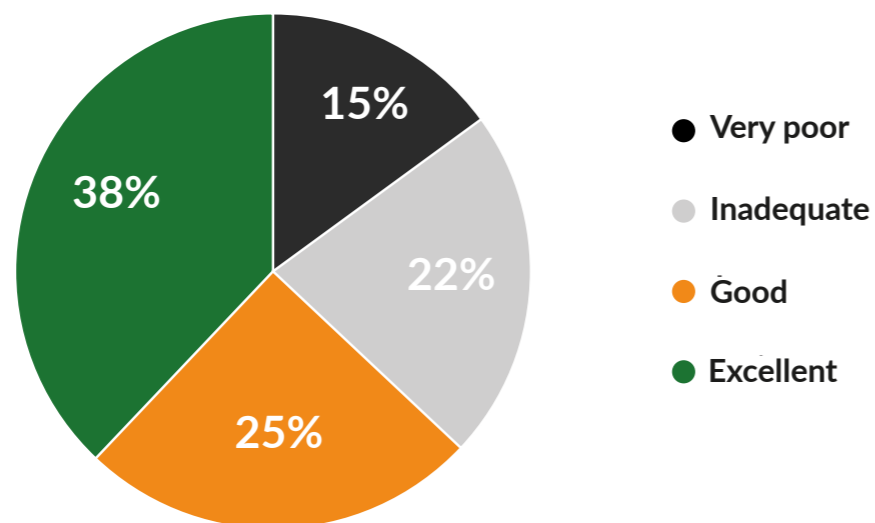
The advice given prior to the "exam" proved effective. The inspection of the garbage, carried out together with the restaurateurs and the staff responsible for handling waste, had already resolved some of the mistakes encountered, due to doubts over and misinterpretations of the regulations. Thus the bags subjected to waste product analysis (collected on an agreed date) provided data that were reassuring for the outcome of the project: the separation of waste was good or excellent in the majority of cases (63%). It will be necessary to insist on improvements with regard to the remaining 37 percent, split between 22 percent rated as inadequate and 15 as very poor. It should be pointed out that behavior was highly variable, with the Chinese subgroup as a whole producing results of lower quality.

The results of the product analysis allow us to draw some conclusions that suggest there are still ample margins for improvement. In the first place we found an almost total absence of compostable bags for the collection of organic waste, as well as an irregular use of the bags of

different colors to hold plastic and dry waste. It is also possible to identify some common errors of separation: plastic packaging was found in the organic waste, ceramic crockery and drinking glasses in the bags for glass, Tetra Pak cartons in the ones for plastic. But a significant proportion of the remaining unsorted waste (38%) was also found to consist of completely recyclable materials. Plastic, paper and metal packaging that could have been placed in the corresponding waste fractions and recycled, as well as used paper napkins – abundant in restaurant waste – that are compatible with composting of the organic fraction. New materials that are already fairly widely used on the market such as packaging and dishes made of bioplastic are organic too but were disposed of in the plastic or unsorted fractions instead of being placed correctly in the brown can.

One decidedly positive note was provided by the assessment of the level of food waste, i.e. the amount of still edible food thrown away, which on average was only 12%.

The quality of the garbage analysed





## Account of an experience

They have been friendly and welcoming. At the third meeting, the one that brought to its conclusion a process that had started out amidst an air of mistrust, the restaurateurs involved in the project *Really Eth(n)ic* held a conversation with the institution, asking for advice and talking about their community and their relationship with the city. The handshakes at the end set the seal on an operation that bet on direct dialogue as a means of tackling the problems of separation and collection in ethnic catering in Milan. It could be said that working together has proved more effective than imposing fines.

It was not easy to overcome the reluctance to cooperate, and we did not always succeed. The strategy adopted for the first meetings has been reviewed and refined over the course of the project to recalibrate the approaches in two areas that are not even homogeneous within their own boundaries. In the district between the Stazione Centrale and Corso Buenos Aires, frequented by immigrants coming from a geographical region that stretches from East Africa to India, this was expected, and the interviews were conducted in more than one language, Italian and English, with forays into Arabic. Generally speaking, while there was a certain amount of skepticism and some refusals to take part in the project, the restaurateurs in the area of the former Lazzaretto were more open to dialogue, intrigued in part by the presence of the linguistic mediator: she was able to build a climate of trust and facilitate the establishment of a relationship with the businesses run by communities coming from Eritrea and other countries bordering on the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

If an understanding of the culture of the broader Middle East made things easier at Porta Venezia, the language skills of the mediator for the Chinese played a crucial role in the area of Via Sarpi, especially when it was necessary to venture into the side streets and the part of the neighborhood farther from Piazzale Baionti, where the influence of Italian and international customers is less marked. In some cases the mediator was caught off-guard by the second generation of restaurateurs, who played the same role but with op-



posite aims. Repulsing the intruder, however politely, was the first reaction of the people running businesses in the Via Canonica-Via Sarpi zone, while the Chinese restaurateurs in the area to the east of the Stazione Centrale, whose customers have always included foreign tourists, proved more receptive. A rapid reassessment of the strategy of approach, giving precedence to institutional authority (with an official letter of introduction), and with the support of the linguistic mediator, increased participation in the area of Via Paolo Sarpi as well. An interest in avoiding the imposition of fines in the future played a part, but so did the desire to show the city, and their Italian neighbors, that they were willing to follow the rules. It was also an opportunity to take advantage of free advice, from a knowledgeable and authoritative source, in order to settle doubts that had nagged them for some time and that, without a sound grasp of the language and the local social conventions, would have proved hard to resolve through the normal information channels.

And so, once signed up, all the restaurateurs realized the utility of the direct channel opened with

AMSA. The visit to the garbage depots shared with the condominiums and the inspection of the spaces set aside for the different fractions of that garbage in those depots (often inadequate) opened the dialogue and the handing out of instructions for the correct separation of waste translated into the relevant languages was an excellent starting point. The initial refusal to cooperate ("We know perfectly well how it's done") gave way to the expression of doubts, to clarifications, to a new attention. And a whole world opened up: from how to recognize compostable bags and the new bioplastics to where to dispose of paper napkins or pizza boxes, from how to make the most of the cramped spaces provided to store the containers to the inconvenience of the times for putting them out and the reasons for disputes with the residents of the apartment blocks, in which the barriers to mutual understanding did not help to blunt the conflict between different interests. Step by step, the sensation that it was all a waste of time gave way to the realization that it was an opportunity to acquire valuable information and inculcate virtuous behavior in their own staff.



Practical problems apart, the project has thrown light on certain aspects of what it means today to be a multicultural metropolis like Milan and on how such an entity functions. Many of the participants showed an explicit willingness to act as a point of reference for their community (with the certificate of participation prominently displayed) or at least a sense of having acquired a role, something that was expressed to different degrees and in different ways in relation to the culture of origin and the level of integration with and openness to the rest of the city. After all, the daily separation of garbage is an effort that is required from everyone in the city, whatever part of the world they come from. And knowledge and comprehension of the rules, not always simple to grasp and often susceptible to change with advances in environmental technologies, can make the difference. How many Milanese know that broken drinking glasses do not go in the container for glass (they may contain lead) and that Tetra Pak cartons should be placed in the one for pa-

per? The difficulties faced by those who do not speak Italian well have highlighted the fact that the separation and collection of garbage requires continual communication, in every part of the city and with all elements of the urban community. *Really Eth(n)ic* has taught AMSA something too.

***“The choice to have a ‘senior representative’ of AMSA accompany a younger mediator made the situation clearer for many of the Chinese interlocutors”***



The certificates of participation in the project were drawn up in the languages preferred by each of the restaurateurs.





## The Borgo of the Chinese

The history of the Chinese quarter of Milan began along Via Canonica, the old postal road for Varese, starting from Porta Tenaglia. The surrounding fields, drained in the 14th century, were rich in vegetable gardens and orchards that supplied the markets at Porta Comasina inside the walls. The area was ruled by the church of the Santissima Trinità founded in 1070 on what is now the area between via Balestrieri and via Giannone, in which the first generation of Italo-Chinese children would be “Milanized” in the first half of the 20th century. Between the 17th and 18th centuries, the Borgo degli Ortolani (of the market gardeners) or “de’ scigulatt” (of the onion sellers, in the Milanese dialect) became a proper village, extending from the city walls to today’s junction between Via Piero della Francesca and Via Cenisio in the vicinity of Piazza Firenze. Together with the Borgo di San Gottardo, outside Porta Ticinese, it was the only expansion of the city beyond the Spanish Walls and represented the means of access to Milan for those coming from the Como and Varese regions.

The construction of the Cimitero Monumentale (1866) and then the opening of Porta Volta (1880) led to the birth of Via Paolo Sarpi and the gradual incorporation of the village into the city, which was completed with the annexation to Milan of the municipality of Corpi Santi, to which it belonged. In 1878 the road to Varese was given the name of Luigi Canonica (the architect who had built the nearby Arena, just inside Porta Tenaglia). In the 1920s, while the city swallowed up the belt of adjoining municipalities, its northernmost section, from Piazza Firenze to Piazza Crespi (now Piazza Gramsci) was named after Piero della Francesca. This was the moment when a small group of Chinese arrived in Milan from Paris and settled (according to tradition) at Via Canonica 35. The old suburban village, up until then inhabited by immigrants from the mountains of Lombardy, proved an ideal setting for a growing community and for its craft activities thanks to its dense fabric of houses with balcony access and courtyards, in which the lines between house, workshop and warehouse were blurred. Starting out as peddlers of cheap necklaces imported from France and Czechoslovakia, the Chinese soon devoted them-



*It was partly due to the gradual consolidation of a “Chinatown” that the old Borgo degli Ortolani was able to evolve without losing its identity*



selves to the manufacture, and sale, of neckties. Via Canonica – along with the Nuova Comasina (today’s Via Farini, opened after the old one, present-day Corso Como, had been cut by the railroad) – was in fact the “Silk Road” leading to the most important production zone of the fiber in Europe. During the Second World War (again according to tradition) they expanded their activity from textiles to leather, with the production of billfolds and schoolbags that were sold wholesale to Italian dealers. The Chinese presence spread into the side streets (like Via Rosmini and Via Giordano Bruno) and remained out of sight, without touching Via Sarpi; but this did not prevent the district already being dubbed the “headquarters of the Chinese” by newspapers in the Interwar era.

Paradoxically, it was partly through the gradual consolidation of a “Chinatown” that the old Borgo degli Ortolani was able to evolve without entirely losing its identity. The district would never become an ethnic enclave: its Chinese inhabitants coexisted with the Italian population; the headquarters of the fire department and the electric company arrived, along with the streetcar depot, factories and housing projects were built, but the atmosphere of the neighborhood remained that of a large village, in which the clear distinction between functional areas that had emerged everywhere else in the city was unable to take hold. Screened by the Parco Sempione and the Cimitero Monumentale, the zone seems to have escaped the more traumatic transformations of the years of the economic boom. With the demolition and reconstruction on another site of the church of the Santissima Trinità (1968), of which only Liutprand’s Romanesque campanile was preserved, the district was shorn of its almost a thousand-year-old center, but even so the currents that were changing the face of the industrial city and its suburbs only touched it lightly.

The coexistence-cohabitation between “market gardeners” and Chinese, however conditioned by the language barrier – the Chinese tended to shun Italian completely, partly due to the difficulty they had in learning it (it took over a thousand hours of lessons in order to speak it decently) – at least until the arrival of the first generations of children educated entirely in Italy, was by now working smoothly and had obtained

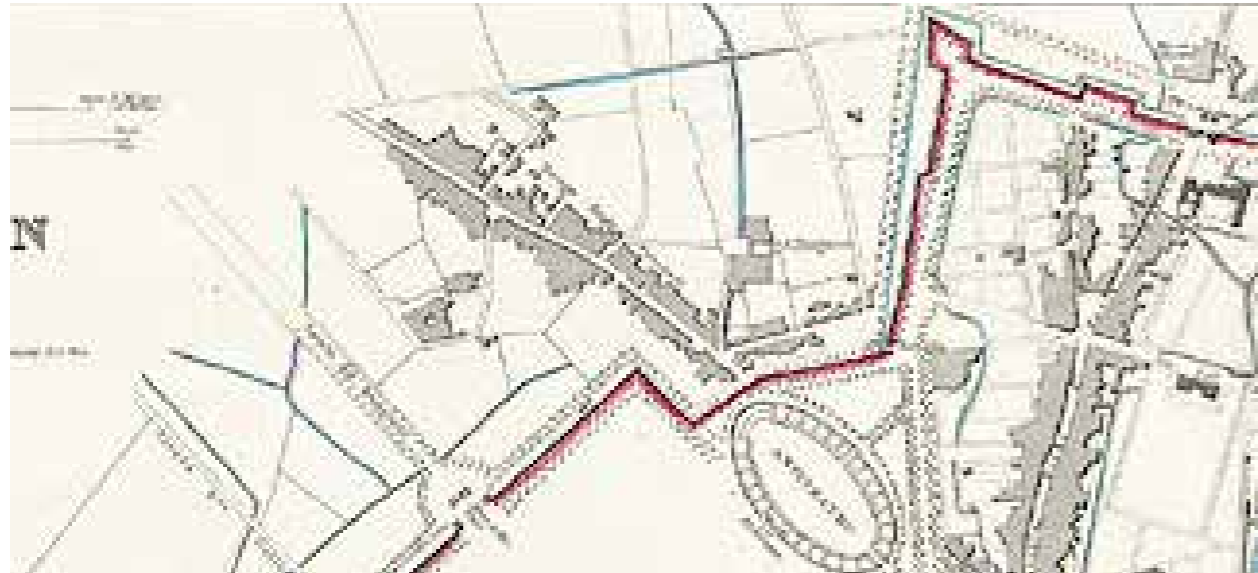


## The quadrilateral of the Eritreans

It has always been a place of passage and reception and still is. The second historical ethnic neighborhood in Milan, located between Porta Venezia and the Stazione Centrale, has its heart in the quadrilateral comprised between Corso Buenos Aires, the Spanish Walls of Porta Venezia, Via Lazzaretto and Via San Gregorio. It follows exactly the perimeter of the quarantine station for plague victims made famous by Alessandro Manzoni, who wove around it the entire story of *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*), the novel which has been compulsory reading for generations of Italian schoolchildren. Situated next to the northern section of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish Walls in the Corpi Santi di Porta Orientale district, and built from 1488 onward in the vicinity of the church of San Gregorio on the orders of Ludovico il Moro, after the last major outbreak of plague in 1630 it continued for a couple of centuries to offer temporary refuge to the poor and to soldiers, and then to peddlers and artisans.

In 1864, with the construction of the Stazione Centrale on the northern side of what is now Piazza della Repubblica, the Lazzaretto was first cut through by the railroad viaduct (today's Viale Tunisia) and then demolished (1882) to make way for housing. But the memory of the past, filtered through and immortalized in Manzoni's tale, was so strong that it was decided to preserve a small portion of it, on Via San Gregorio, in which a Russian Orthodox church was installed in 1974. The octagonal church at the center was also preserved, and after a series of ups and down has recently been restored. The names of the streets in the area also come from *I promessi sposi*: Via Lecco, after the hometown of Renzo and Lucia, Via Tadino and Via Settala after the doctors engaged in the battle against the plague and Via Casati, dedicated to the Capuchin friar who was director of the Lazzaretto in 1630.

Following the demolition of the hospital complex, the

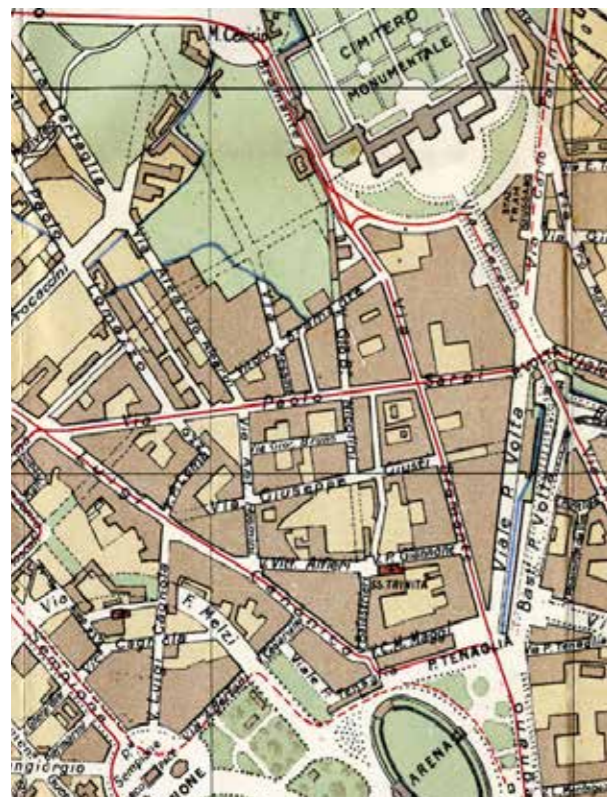


Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century the Borgo degli Ortolani stretched along the postal road for Varese, today's Via Canonica. Map by William Barnard Clarke, 1832.

the blessing of the municipality and, after the 1970s, of Chinese institutions too. This would be put to the test by the boom in arrivals from China and the transformation of the Milanese economy, both of which began in the 1980s. While the number of "official" residents started to rise rapidly – soaring from less than 4000 in 1995 (there were only 400 in the 1940s) to the 29,000 of today – the historic Chinese quarter of Milan see-

med to reflect, on a small scale, Milan's transformation from an industrial center to capital of the service sector. The network of restaurants – the first, La Pagoda, was opened in 1962 in the presence of the Chinese ambassador – had already spread throughout the city in the 1980s, but it was above all the last decade of the century and the first of the next one that saw an increase in investment in the services and in technology. Via Paolo Sarpi was transformed, filling up with Chinese signs and brands, and progressively became the center of services for the Chinese community of the city and the whole of Northern Italy, for Italians in search of exotic flavors and colors and for tourists, from China and elsewhere, while the leather workshops were moved to areas farther out (at first to Isola, beyond the bridge of the Stazione Garibaldi, and then above all to the area of Via Padova-Viale Monza). But Milan's Chinatown seems to have overcome even this transition. Coexistence with Italian residents and traders hit a bad patch at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and reports of unrest appeared in the newspapers again in 2007, but the problem seems to have been resolved with the semi-pedestrianization of Via Sarpi, which has made it even more similar to the tranquil shopping streets and promenades of the provincial towns.

The construction of the Cimitero Monumentale (1866) and the subsequent opening of Porta Volta in Piazzale Baiamonti (1880) led to the creation of Via Paolo Sarpi. Map published by the Editrice Sacchi, 1904.



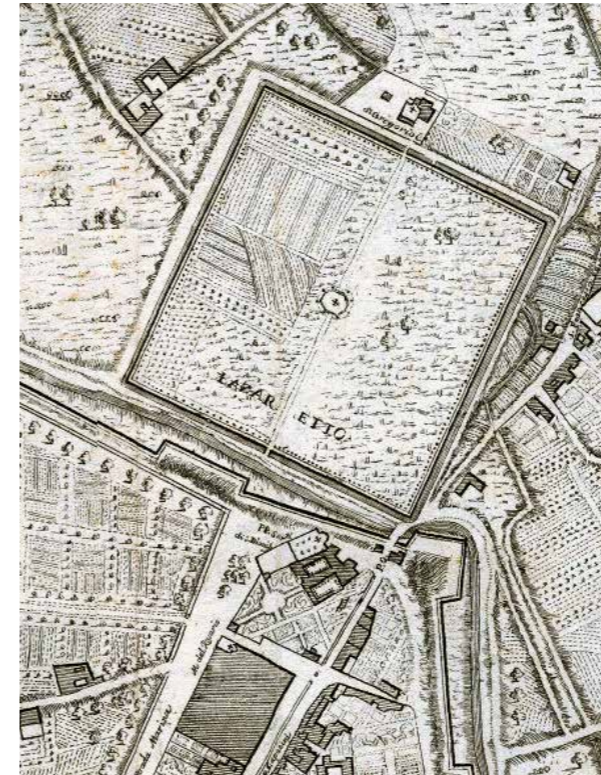




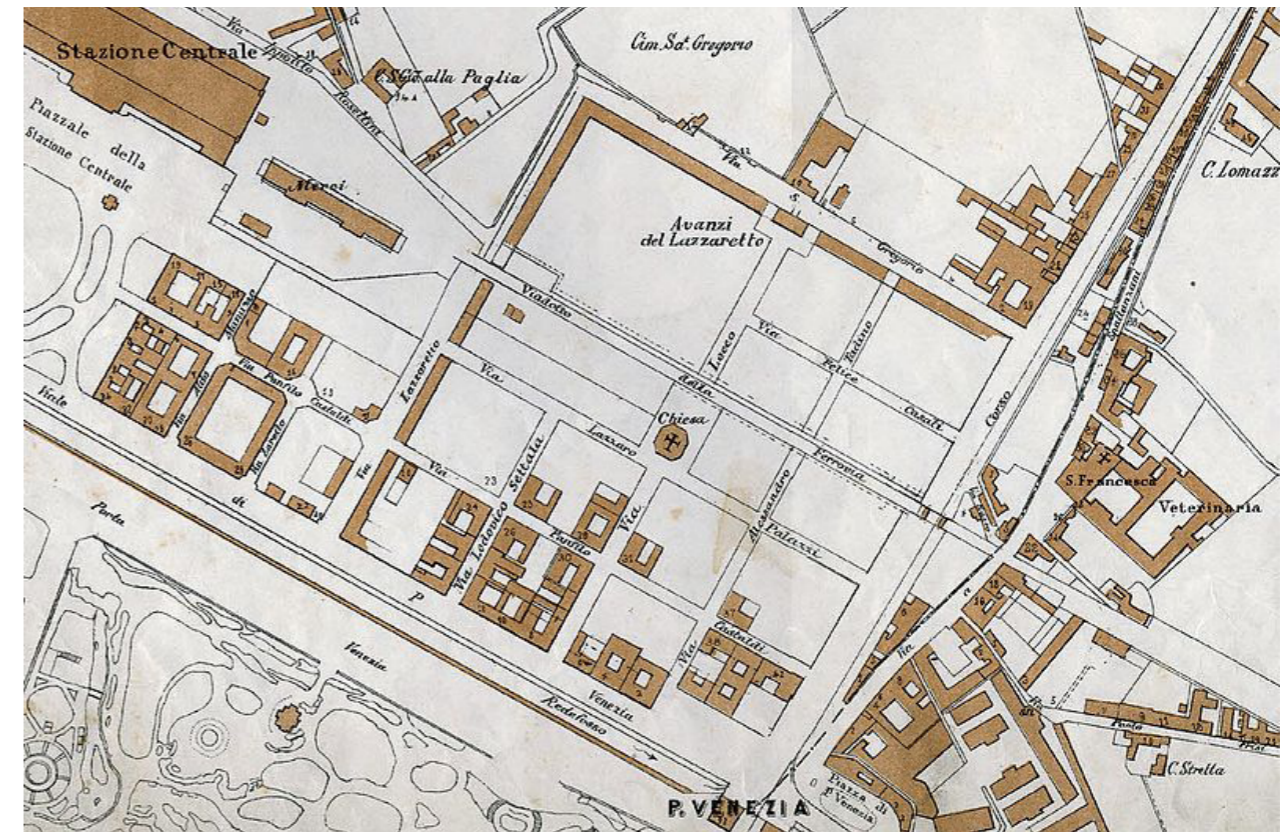
area seems to have changed its appearance, but in reality many elements of its identity remain intact, commencing with its original form (a quadrangular wall that enclosed a courtyard surrounded by an arcade), which echoed that of the Middle Eastern caravansera, the inns that gave shelter to desert caravans, discovered at the times of the Crusades. In fact the perimeter of the old sanatorium can still be clearly discerned on the map: the twenty blocks that fill the space, delimited by narrow streets that intersect at right angles, are distinctly reminiscent of Arab cities. Even its function is essentially unchanged: close to the station, the district remains a point of arrival and departure for the more marginal fringes of the population.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the place of the plague victims and the poor was taken by immigrants just arrived from the valleys of Lombardy and then from Southern Italy, by middlemen, adventurers and prostitutes who took advantage of the boarding houses and lodgings that thronged the zone and bestowed on it, rightly or wrongly, the reputation of a shady district. The former Lazzaretto was certainly a place of transit, different from the area that was being developed to the northeast around the new Central Station (1931), hard to read and regarded with misgiving from the outside. But it was also a safe haven in which the newly arrived, even the ones with no means and no connections, could find a place to sleep and make their first contacts, before venturing into the big city. Even its architecture, wavering between bourgeois palaces and social housing, marked it out as a place of transition between the world that turned around the station and the “upper-class” development of the axis of Corso Buenos Aires, linking Corso di Porta Venezia with the Villa Reale of Monza, from whose buildings in Art Nouveau and eclectic style it is separated by an invisible boundary.

Between the 1960s and the 1970s, when the first influx of immigrants from the Third World arrived in Milan, the quadrilateral became a “stronghold” of the Eritrean and Ethiopian community. One of the city’s oldest communities, though fairly small (even today, the number of official residents from the two former Italian colonies barely exceeds 2500), it draws on the underground links that still exist with Italy. Early on it showed itself capable of establishing a sound relationship with



*The former Lazzaretto was a safe haven, in which the newly arrived, even the ones with no means and no connections, could find a place to sleep and make their first contacts, before venturing into the big city*



Above, the Lazzaretto during the work of demolition, in a plan produced by the municipal offices, 1884. Top, the Lazzaretto in its original form, next to the Bastioni di Porta Orientale in the plan drawn up by Marc'Antonio del Re, 1734.



## The field team



### Emiliano Barcella

He graduated in Languages and Cultures for International Communication and Cooperation from the University of Milan. He approached Chinese “in a gradual and unexpected way, driven not by passion but by practical aims linked to a presumed usefulness of Mandarin in the world of work.”



### Agnese Ghelli

A final-year student in Languages and Cultures for International Communication and Cooperation at the University of Milan. She has specialized in the dialects of the Maghreb region. She has worked as a linguistic-cultural mediator for Arab-speaking patients in the health service.



### Simone Orsi

He graduated in Environmental Sciences from the Bicocca University of Milan. At AMSA he works on marketing and strategic development, the development of innovative systems for the collection and treatment of waste, projects of international cooperation and training in the circular economy.



### Andrea De Poli

A final-year student in Linguistic Sciences for Business at the Catholic University of Milan, he devoted himself to the study of Arabic. He has worked as an intern at AMSA, collaborating with the Operating Products Development and Customer Satisfaction department.



the public institutions that were located in the district in the 1980s – such as the Foreigners’ Bureau of the City and the head offices of the CISL trade union and its tenants’ branch SICET, with whose help the Eritreans won the right to public housing for foreigners as well in 1980. Thus the restaurants and bars opened by Eritreans and Ethiopians on Via Lazzaro Palazzi (named after the architect of the Lazzaretto) and Via Panfilo Castaldi have become the heart of a community and a network of relations that extends beyond the district, as far as Via Melzo and the Capuchin monastery on Via Kramer (seat of one of the first services for immigrants), the 1930s housing project of Calvairate and the Coptic church on Via Ippocrate at Affori. But they also remain an obligatory point of transition for a transnational diaspora that crosses the borders of Italy, the point of arrival in Europe for those who, coming from East Africa, plan to move on to Germany, Sweden, the United States or Canada – as became clear to all in 2015 when, at the height of the migratory crisis in the Mediterranean, the gardens on Viale Vittorio Veneto next to the Spanish Bastions filled up with the camps of refugees.

As in any other haven worthy of this name, with time and with the growth of the immigrant population, other nationalities and ethnic groups have joined the Eritreans and Ethiopians in the former Lazzaretto. Businesses run by Arabs from Egypt, Lebanon and the Maghreb, Senegalese, Bangladeshi, Pakistanis and even some Chinese have enriched the streets of the old quadrilateral with new colors. The result is the reproduction in miniature of a sort of “broader Middle East” in which, against the backdrop of buildings dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that exotic and mysterious world which, from the gateway of the Red Sea, opened up for the readers of Emilio Salgari and Hugo Pratt seems to have come back to life.

A small world that has shown itself able to coexist even with the latest influx of people drawn by the protection offered by the narrow streets and invisible walls of the old Lazzaretto: the gay community, which for some years now has made its home around some historic bars and clubs on Via Lecco, turning the area between the Stazione Centrale and Piazza Oberdan into the venue for the Gay Pride parade that is held at the end of June every year.



Catering, an activity that by its nature involves culture, economics and social relations, with one foot in the private sphere and the other in the public one, is central to the image that Milan has chosen to present of itself for some time now. Thus it has proved to be a door allowing us to enter new worlds, at one and the same time close by and far away and still to a great extent mysterious, that now inhabit the space of our city and to find out how they are enriching its heritage.



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