

*Text Simone Collet*

## **Maize, man and history**

**Even before wheat and rice, maize is proudly at the top of the podium in the leading trio of cereals grown around the world.**

This first place is hardly surprising: not only do the nutritional virtues of maize for men not need to be demonstrated, but it is also widely used as food for animals, in the food sector as well as in the production of biogas and green fuel.

### **A long history**

Originally from Mexico, its culture dates back to the beginnings of time.

9000 years ago native American farmers began to develop a local grass adapted to the humid tropical climate, called teosinte. The grains were harvested, crushed and ground to make a popular flour which was very appreciated.



Obtained from teosinte through patient selections combined with favourable genetic mutations, maize was the food basis of all pre-Colombian civilisations that succeeded each other in South America. Some even considered corn as a child of the gods.

Applying the rules of sustainable development before our modern times, the farmers used a method of organic cultivation by cultivating a trio of complementary plants together called “the three sisters”: i.e. maize, squash and climbing beans.

With the return of Christophe Columbus, maize was introduced in Southern Europe under the name of wheat from India (name which was kept in Canada). In other parts it is called Barbarie wheat or wheat from Turkey, because of doubts concerning its origin during its propagation on the old continent.

In the first half of the 20th century hybrids and then transgenic seeds were created, making maize the symbol of intensive agriculture, the latter being subject to intense controversy. In addition, the progress in genetics allowed the development of early

varieties and other varieties adapted to less warm climates, making it possible to quadruple the yields in the second half of the century.

### **Corn today**



Named “Zea mays” in botanical science, maize belongs to the family of poaceae (or grasses). Either the whole plant is harvested or only the extremely starchy grains.

Maize grows rapidly and its yield is better than wheat. Due to its tropical origin an especial photosynthesis allows it to perfectly enhance the light and heat as do for example sorgho and sugar cane.

The cultivation of corn is now universal as it is cultivated in a 150 countries spread over the five continents. Depending on the varieties and the geographic location this robust cereal can indeed easily grow from 0 meters (sea level) to 3000 meter altitude.

### **Economic advantages**

The main exporting countries are the United States, Argentina, Brazil, the Ukraine and France. Together they represent more than 80% of the world export. Nearly 2/3 of the production is for animal food, especially in industrialised countries.

### **Consumption**

In terms of consumption the United States comes again in the lead, followed by China, the European Union, Brazil and Mexico.

Maize satisfies gourmets from all countries with the infinite palette of its preparations: in fresh and crunchy grains, in the form of grilled ears, as popcorn, cornflakes, maize (starch).....As well as in the “farina bona” and “polenta” two specialities of Ticino, the southernmost canton of Switzerland with a climate particularly favourable to its cultivation.

Good receipt:

#### **Polenta bramata from Ticino**

- Boil 1,1 litre of vegetable broth with a little salt added (or a mixture of half water and half milk).
- Pour in rain 220 g bramata corn (corn grains)
- Reduce the heat and cook for 10 minutes, stirring constantly with a large wooden spoon

- Reduce the heat a bit and let simmer for half an hour stirring occasionally
- Add a nut of butter and 50 g grated parmesan cheese
- Add some pepper, mix and serve with a salad