

The Art of Cooking

The First Modern Cookery Book

Composed by the Eminent Maestro Martino of Como a Most Prudent Expert in This Art, Once Cook to the Most Reverend Cardinal Trevisan, Patriarch of Aquileia

Edited & With an Introduction by LUIGI BALLERINI

Translated From Italian & Annotated by JEREMY PARZEN

With Fifty Modernized Recipes by STEFANIA BARZINI

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The *Art of Cooking* is a handsome volume in the California Studies in Food and Culture series. Maestro Martino's book exists in five undated manuscripts composed sometime between 1450 and 1527. The primary text used in this edition comes from the Library of Congress, with supplements from a version housed in the Vatican.

This is the tale of a book, a cook, and his Boswell. We know precious little about Maestro Martino of Como, but rather more about his recipes and the part they played in the transformation of cooking from craft to art in Renaissance Italy. Martino's Boswell was Bartolomeo Sacchi (1421-1481), better known as Platina. Platina's career includes components common to many Renaissance humanist trajectories: scholar, educator, soldier of fortune, and client of powerful secular and religious aristocrats. His connection with the Gonzaga, rulers of Mantua, brought him to Rome in 1461, when one of the family was made a cardinal. In Rome, Platina found his home and his circle with one of the great epicures of the age, Cardinal Ludovico Trevisan, the employer of one Maestro Martino of Como.

This was no plain cook. "What a cook, O immortal gods," wrote Platina, "you bestowed in my friend Martino of Como." The association of food with genius was, as Luigi Ballerini argues in his lively, informative introduction, a new one in the Renaissance and constituted a break with medieval attitudes about the place of the cook, and of food, in the social and political order. While the princes of the church, like medieval monarchs, knew well the uses of banquets to display power and status, the Renaissance, with its admiration of ancient Rome, came to emphasize conviviality and excellence in preparing and eating food among friends. Rather than throwing a sumptuous banquet to impress the masses, Renaissance gourmards gravitated to small, exquisitely produced entertainments for a carefully chosen group of intimates.

The preparation and consumption of food also had a moral dimension. Gluttony was a sin, fasting a virtue. Platina is known primarily for one work, but it was enough. *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, written and published in the 1490s, recast the enjoyment of food from a gross sin to a healthful calling. "Right" pleasure in this case means "permissible." Fine foods were fine so long as they were consumed in moderation with the goal of achieving the most harmonious balance of mind and body. The result was a rehabilitation of gluttony; as Ballerini put it, one could have both health and hedonism. Any proprietor of an expensive weight-loss establishment will recognize this line of argument, and Ballerini is

not blind to its self-serving qualities, of the wealthy spending money on an exquisitely moderate diet while peasants went hungry.

Platina lifted Maestro Martino's recipes and included them in his text, along with much praise for this "prince of cooks." Maestro Martino was subsequently moved (or enraged?) to create his own text, which spawned many imitators and much puzzlement for later food historians. What makes his "Cookery Book" modern? Primarily, he explained things. He specified how many people a dish would serve and the measurements for ingredients. He noted the proper utensils to use in preparation, the proper method for cooking, and for how long. It may seem odd to us that no one had done this before. Yet how many times have we tried to get specifics out of a cook for a cherished recipe only to be told to take a bunch of this and some of that and cook it? This clarity and openness in revealing his technique was a crucial distinction from the medieval approach, when cookery was a craft secret. Artists do not need to cloak how they do it; in fact, revealing the tricks of the trade only enhances their artistry.

Nonetheless, the recipes themselves reveal the pull of continuity as well as change. While Ballerini argues that Maestro Martino was an innovator, the recipes embody other medieval qualities, such as the use of sugar and spices to flavor everything. Yet Ballerini argues that it was *how* Maestro Martino used these ingredients that was new. Rather than "assault" eggs, meat, or fish with a heavily spiced sauce, Maestro Martino

stipulates that the ingredients employed to enhance the flavor of foods should be sought by keeping in mind the nature of the staples themselves.

Different foods should be handled in different ways. In a world where such a principle was unknown, the person who first propounded it would be deified, and Platina did so for Maestro Martino: "He who is versed in cookery is not far removed from genius."

To the modern reader, his directions still seem imprecise. On the one hand, in a recipe for boiled white meat, he instructs one to cut it in pieces "however you wish," place over heat in a pot "that is not too narrow," and add salt "as necessary." On the other hand, he gives advice on dealing with alternative scenarios—if the salt contains dirt, if the meat is old and hard, etc. His most frequent phrase is "however you wish," followed by "as suits your master's tastes." Like all great teachers, he recognizes that the crucial thing is the method and the framework it provides—the adept can then fill in the details.

Other touches of his time can be recognized in the directions: Cut up lard "into small pieces like playing dice," stir a dish "until you have said ten Lord's Prayers," and roll mustard into balls "the size of those that you shoot with a crossbow." The medieval love of color and spectacle is also present. There are many recipes for making all-white dishes, or for making others yellow (which would call for expensive saffron). For spectacle and *sprezzatura*, there are directions on

how to “dress a peacock with all its feathers, so that when cooked, it appears to be alive and spews fire from its beak,” and to serve a bowl of aspic with live fish swimming in it. There are also many recipes that involve making one dish or ingredient look like another, such as imitation eggs for Lenten or fast days, making one squab look like two, and making trout roe look like peas. Fortunately, 50 of the recipes have been modernized by Stefania Barzini with comments, which allows the adventurous cook to try them. They range from sauces, pasta, eggs, and fritters to savory pies, meat, poultry, and seafood dishes.

Combined with Ballerini’s introduction, *The Art of Cooking* should appeal to many kinds of readers, including those who enjoy Renaissance history, those who find the philology of food terms fascinating, and those who would like to cook recipes that are more than 500 years old. It helps to be tolerably familiar with the world of the Renaissance humanists and the politics of the Italian peninsula during the Quattrocento. For those less well versed in these areas, Ballerini has expanded and explained much in his endnotes, which provide short biographies of personages mentioned, and Jeremy Parzen’s footnotes give details on the provenance of certain dishes and their names, as well as just how long it would take to say the Lord’s Prayer when using it as a timer (30 seconds).

Renaissance princes fussed over cooks the way they did painters and intellectuals, and we have been doing it ever since. The present-day cult of chefs as rock stars has deep roots. We will leave the last word of wisdom to the Maestro:

And note, my master, that if your cook is not sharp enough, he will never prepare anything good, no matter how good it is to begin with. ■

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