

**Fit For A Prince:  
Banquets, Cuisine &  
Gastronomy of the  
Nobility, Clergy &  
Humanists in  
Renaissance Italy**

by Thomas Q. Marabello

May 6, 2009

Food in European History

Georgetown University

The Renaissance was a rebirth of classical civilization, impacting education, literature, philosophy and the arts. During this period that is considered to be the birth of the modern world, new customs, foods and ways of eating were also introduced. Humanists, clergy and nobles enjoyed banquets which included fine foods and lively table conversation. Renaissance cuisine and banquets were however, not completely a rebirth. While there was an interest in antiquity and some practices and concepts were brought back during Renaissance banquets, there were also examples of continuing medieval practices and the beginning of completely new ones. Cuisine and gastronomy of the Italian Renaissance included both new and old notions, due to the rebirth, continuation of medieval preferences, and goods and foods that were introduced from the new world. The greatest influence on Renaissance cuisine and gastronomy came from the new educated class of humanists, many of whom promoted healthy eating and living practices. Italian Renaissance dining revolved around conversations and discussion, and the food was supposed to be nourishing and healthy. Unlike during Roman and medieval times, the food at banquets was not the central focus of the meal for learned men. In addition, people tended to not overeat or over indulge, and more healthy entrees of fish and poultry were often served. Renaissance cuisine was truly a new experience, influenced by changing views on health and eating, yet still influenced in many ways by ancient and medieval views and practices.

The Renaissance began in Italy, specifically Florence, in the mid fourteenth century. It was not until the fifteenth century, thanks to Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, that cookbooks and written compilations of recipes first appeared in the modern world. "In this period, the upper classes' diet was quite similar all over Europe, with little regional variations."<sup>1</sup> The notion of national cuisines would not appear until much later and in Italy not until unification in the mid nineteenth century. Nobles consumed lighter and more refined

---

<sup>1</sup> Fabio Parasecoli, *Food Culture in Italy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 22.

foods.<sup>2</sup> Fish was eaten on Fridays among all European Christians. Fowl and mutton were popular to serve at banquets, with several dishes appearing on a table simultaneously.<sup>3</sup> “The Renaissance culture made banquets an important form of entertainment, acknowledging the social and aesthetic importance of food, in the frame of a renewed interest in the sensual aspects of man, often neglected during previous centuries.”<sup>4</sup> Italian princes and nobles used banquets for various reasons. Often they were meant to show off a city-state’s importance and developments. Sometimes they were held to honor a guest, often a visiting ruler. As humanism developed and spread, many banquets included learned men who were honored and brought to discuss a topic, discovery, or book. “Everything was an elaborate performance in cooking, serving, and eating.”<sup>5</sup> Lavish banquets complete with music, conversation and many guests were not the norm during medieval times. “Banquets became an occasion to display power and sophistication, and great attention was dedicated not only to food and service, but also to presentations and manners...”<sup>6</sup> In Renaissance Italy, banquets were used to celebrate the past and revel in recent achievements. They were meant to provide an experience that affected all the senses and would be remembered and talked about long afterwards. New friendships and political alliances were struck, while like-minded individuals discussed the latest ideas being bandied about in society. Guests enjoyed the time of their lives and those who threw successful banquets could count on “good press” for quite some time.

Before delving further into banquets and examples of some famous ones from Renaissance Italy, it is crucial to examine some cookbooks that were written during the period.

---

<sup>2</sup> Parasecoli, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ken Albala, *The Banquet: Dining in the Great Courts of Late Renaissance Europe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Parasecoli, 25.

They are primary sources that provide good insight into what people liked to eat, how food was prepared, and what was available to them in Italy's various regions. The two most famous are *The Art of Cooking* by Maestro Martino and *On Right Pleasure and Good Health* by Bartolomeo Platina. Both men knew each other and were much influenced by the regions of Italy in which they lived and worked, moving around during their lifetimes. Without their published works, we would not know nearly as much about Italian Renaissance cooking and cuisine. Both men's works were widely read and would influence cooking and views on healthy eating and living for decades. We also know that Platina "borrowed" heavily from Martino's recipes, translating them into Latin.<sup>7</sup> Today this would be considered plagiarism.

"Very little is known about the life of Maestro Martino."<sup>8</sup> He was born in the Blenio valley of Ticino and worked in Lombardy at two princely courts before moving to Rome, possibly Naples, and then back to northern Italy toward the end of his life.<sup>9</sup> Martino's *Libro* (or *The Art of Cooking*) was likely written in Rome in 1464 or 1465.<sup>10</sup> We know less about Martino than Platina. He was not rediscovered until 1927 when American chef Joseph D. Vehling purchased a copy of Martino's manuscript from an Italian antiquarian and then wrote an article revealing his discovery that the author was the same Martino whom Platina acknowledged as his source.<sup>11</sup> "Far from being a mere list of recipes, as was the custom of culinary manuals at the time, *The Art of Cooking* is a veritable treatise, which not only diligently divides various types of food into separate chapters, but also reveals the secrets of the art itself, seeking to disseminate

---

<sup>7</sup> Maestro Martino, *The Art of Cooking*, ed. Luigi Ballerini, trans. Jeremy Parzen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Ella Milham, "Martino and His De Re Coquinaria," *Medieval Food and Drink XXI* (1995): 61.

<sup>9</sup> Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari, *Italian Cuisine: A Cultural History*, trans. Aine O'Healy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Martino, 16.

the tricks of the trade.”<sup>12</sup> In many ways it is a lot like a modern cookbook with helpful suggestions on how to prepare certain foods and dishes. It includes servings by number of people, types of ingredients, cooking methods, suitable cookware and preparation time.<sup>13</sup> “In short, the book describes each and every phase of the culinary process in some detail such that it can be utilized by anyone capable of following instructions.”<sup>14</sup> Martino’s lasting contribution was the creation of a clear and reliable gastronomic record.<sup>15</sup> He offers readers linguistic clarification, simplifying concepts and methods.<sup>16</sup> Certain words for foods or ingredients could be understood in several languages. This was helpful, especially since France was on the border and French and Italian cuisines had and would continue to influence one another. “Despite Maestro Martino’s monumental effort to promote a modicum of terminological standardization, a full consciousness of the necessity of a univocal gastronomic lexicon would not dawn until several centuries later.”<sup>17</sup>

In examining some of Martino’s recipes, we see that there were medieval influences, especially from the Catalan tradition.<sup>18</sup> Visual gratification had been important before the Renaissance and would continue in many Italian dishes.<sup>19</sup> Other influences include Arabic cooking with recipes that include sprinkling sugar and spices, and also flavoring sauces with raisins.<sup>20</sup> Martino’s work was published a few decades before the age of exploration, so we know that spices and goods from the Americas were not yet available. However, spices and goods from the East such as sugar and nutmeg were more readily available during the mid

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Martino, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 28.

fifteenth century due to increased trade. Martino's greatest talent was his ability to combine old and new ingredients.<sup>21</sup> "It is perhaps the most salient aspect of his art—a trait which makes him the first incarnation of a modern cook."<sup>22</sup> This is why his work is so important and relevant to looking at Italian Renaissance cuisine. The Renaissance in general was a mix of old and new practices and beliefs. *The Art of Cooking* is a book that epitomizes the Renaissance because it is yet another example of how this movement influenced all aspects of living. Old and new influences came from antiquity, Arabia and the East, and the Middle Ages. Martino's recipes and methods reveal this balance and back and forth that was occurring during the period.

The so called "Mediterranean diet" that was present before the Columbian Exchange included wheat flour, backyard vegetables such as carrots, celery and onions, and various herbs.<sup>23</sup> Martino's recipes include many of these ingredients, along with other vegetables grown in Italy, including fava beans, peas, chickpeas, squash and eggplant.<sup>24</sup> Before Martino, vegetables were only used by the poor but thanks to his recipes and ideas, vegetables were found next to roasts and fish on the tables of the rich.<sup>25</sup> In examining the chapters of recipes, Martino begins with meat entrees, including veal roast, pheasant and capon.<sup>26</sup> The next chapter includes victual and consommés that would obviously go with your meat dish. Many of these types of victual include peppercorns, broth, garlic, eggs, crushed fava beans and parsley.<sup>27</sup> He then gives recipes for sauces, tortes, fritters, cooking eggs and fish. Many of these dishes would likely have appeared at Renaissance banquets. They were often dishes that would take time to prepare and would show off one's wealth and ability to pay for the food and its preparation by a chef or

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Martino, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 62-66.

kitchen staff. The last two chapters deal with regional recipes. “Of course many of Martino’s recipes seem to be Italian, such as those he designates as Florentine, Roman and Bolognese. There are also names for fish in his sixth book which were so local to Italy as to have no Latin equivalents...”<sup>28</sup> The Riva Del Garda reflects the Genoese style, with recipes for a pepper sauce, Genoese style macaroni, and how to make ravioli.<sup>29</sup> This chapter reveals that Martino likely lived in or around Genoa or at least was familiar with their regional cuisine. The Neapolitan recipes reflect a more central Italian style of cooking and gastronomy with specific recipes in the Florentine style such as pan-baked meat.<sup>30</sup> Also there are recipes that reference the French and German styles, such as French mustard, scrambled eggs in the German style, and apple tart in the French style.<sup>31</sup> This Neapolitan style reflects outside influences, which makes sense since Florence had long been a major center of banking and trade. All of these recipes show that Martino was an experienced chef who had moved around and traveled around the Italian Peninsula. He especially valued using vegetables, fresh ingredients and spices in his dishes. For example, many of the sauces include salt and pepper to taste.<sup>32</sup> Martino’s recipes give us a good sense of cuisine from around Italy during the early Renaissance. They certainly influenced other chefs, since Platina took many of his recipes and included them in his widely read book, *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*.

Turning to Platina, we know much more about this man and the times in which he lived. He was born Bartolomeo Sacchi to a poor family in 1421.<sup>33</sup> He became known as Platina from

---

<sup>28</sup> Milham, 64.

<sup>29</sup> Martino, 115-16.

<sup>30</sup> Martino, 128.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-36.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-47.

<sup>33</sup> Bartolomeo Platina, *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, trans. and ed. Mary Ella Milham (Tempe: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), 2.

the village of his birth.<sup>34</sup> He went to study in Mantua, became a tutor to a Gonzaga who went on to become a cardinal and then went to study in Florence, where one of his classmates was Lorenzo de' Medici.<sup>35</sup> Platina became well educated and arrived in Rome during the papacy of Pius II, himself a well-known humanist.<sup>36</sup> He soon became a member of the Roman Academy, an organization that was devoted to the revival of classical learning. Platina wrote books, including an oratio that praised the liberal arts in which the pope was skilled.<sup>37</sup> Soon after possibly meeting Maestro Martino in 1463, who was then chef to Cardinal Ludovico Trevisan, he began writing *On Right Pleasure and Good Health* (or *De Honesta Voluptate et Valetudine* in Latin). It was printed for the first time around 1470.<sup>38</sup> Platina went on to become a well-known humanist, author of *The Lives of the Popes*, and the first librarian of the new Vatican Library, beginning in 1475. He died from plague in Rome in September 1481.<sup>39</sup>

*On Right Pleasure and Good Health* is an important humanist work that includes chapters on healthy living, along with many recipes. It is a book that represents many key Renaissance ideals on how to live long and well, what to eat, and how to stay fit. It is widely known that humanists emphasized that people live balanced lives by reading, eating healthy, exercising, and studying various subjects in school to be well-rounded and worldly. Platina was an ideal person to write such a work, since he had lived in three Renaissance centers, was widely read and educated, and was a member of the Roman Academy, which was very devoted to the revival of classical works and ideas. “He wrote almost continuously about the need for an ideal world, for a serene and simple life in good physical health, for the endurance with equanimity of

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 3-5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>38</sup> Platina, 25.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 43.

every catastrophe life could offer, for the continuation of a Church which symbolized the triumph of the Good.”<sup>40</sup> Being a good person and citizen involved exercising, eating healthy, and being devoted to community, church and God. This epitomized the humanist movement that began in Italy and would spread throughout Europe. It is still timely today, reflected in education and many organizations around the world.

According to Mary Ella Milham, *De Honesta Voluptate* (the common abbreviated title) is a unique work and we know little about its composition or background.<sup>41</sup> The title shows that Platina was concerned with right pleasures and good health.<sup>42</sup> Right pleasures would mean honorable mental and physical pleasure and virtues that God would approve of.<sup>43</sup> This would indicate a concern with abiding by religious laws and notions. Perhaps Platina was concerned that as people began rediscovering classical works, including Apicius’ famous cookbook, they may be inclined to return to feasting and overindulging in fine foods. We know from The Bible that gluttony is a sin and many Romans enjoyed overeating and feasting, before the spread of Christianity. At banquets, guests were expected to control showing any sign of gluttony or from discussing taste and flavors.<sup>44</sup> While Platina’s intentions are not certain, he clearly wanted to make sure that people were well balanced, following guidelines for healthy living and eating, likely including at banquets and parties. Balance and moderation were upheld, as they still are today.

Platina’s book is in many ways different from Martino’s. “Platina’s work is nonetheless of a different character, because it places the recipes in a broader cultural and scientific context, emphasizing the role that each food might occupy in the culinary “system” from the point of

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Platina, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Parasecoli, 25.

view of diet as well as that of hospitality.”<sup>45</sup> He doesn’t just give us recipes, food preparation methods and suggested meal plans. Platina did a lot of research and includes ideas and ways of cooking from across Italy. Unlike Martino, he did not just focus on meals and what should be served. His book includes chapters on where to live, exercising the body, and what should be available on the dinner table. *On Right Pleasure and Good Health* is really a guidebook for healthy daily living.

Platina’s recipes and focus on food products reveals a very Italian influence and outlook.<sup>46</sup> Geographical references can be seen throughout his book, including specialties from regions throughout Italy. For example, he mentions sardines from Lake Garda, hens from Padua, olives from Bologna, carrots from Viterbo, bass from the Tiber River and oranges from Naples, to name a few.<sup>47</sup> Certain cities, towns, and regions were known for specialty items and Platina appreciates, recognizes and includes them as part of his work. While he was clearly influenced by antiquity, as were all humanist men, the dietary values attributed to foods are inspired and influenced by medieval beliefs.<sup>48</sup> For example, Platina writes that meat is the best nourishment of food, a view that was not part of ancient Rome, where bread was considered better than meat.<sup>49</sup> This is an important point, because it shows that many of Platina’s ideas and recipes were a continuation of medieval practices. It also shows a difference with Martino, who greatly influenced Platina. Martino does not explicitly state what the most nourishing type of food is and he does not include a lot of meat dishes among his recipes. We know that Martino was a fan of eating vegetables. So perhaps in many ways Platina’s view was more medieval and Martino’s was more modern. Platina wasn’t the only one stuck in the past, per se. “Though conscious of

---

<sup>45</sup> Capatti and Montanari, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Capatti and Montanari, 10.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

practicing a cuisine that was new in many respects and certainly in the vanguard when compared to the rest of Europe, Italian cooks of the Renaissance do not show any intention of challenging their predecessors.”<sup>50</sup>

In terms of dining, Platina writes about the importance of cleanliness, appearance and dinner talk.<sup>51</sup> “He emphasizes the importance of clean tableware, spotless table linen, and attractive seasonal decoration. He also suggests cleanliness as a characteristic of the cook and goes so far as to enjoin diners to refrain from satire, buffoonery, or highly competitive games in the two hours of “first digestion” after a meal.”<sup>52</sup> This shows that Platina valued not just what was served, but what occurred before, during and after a meal. He is placing importance on appearance, cleanliness, proper digestion and what people say and do during meal time. Meals, and the company of others, were supposed to be enjoyed and people were encouraged to take their time and enjoy the ambiance and conversation, not just the food and drink. Many of his suggestions are still very timely. However, Platina was also not a conformist, rejecting much of the excess of the rich.<sup>53</sup> This makes sense considering his advice not to overindulge and his emphasis on healthy eating. He likely went to many dinner parties and banquets and was probably disturbed by the lavishness and gluttony that may have occurred in his presence. Lastly, looking at some of Platina’s books within *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, he offers readers many suggestions. In Book I, Martino is praised as “the prince of cooks of our age” from whom he personally learned the art of cooking.<sup>54</sup> The next item of interest is the order of the meal. He advocates eating apples and pears for the first course, followed by lettuce with vinegar

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Platina, 56.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Platina, 57.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 119.

and oil (essentially a salad).<sup>55</sup> In the other books, he mentions foods worth eating, including pears, grapes, eggs, honey, milk and cheese. He states that cheese should be eaten in the third course and says fresh, not aged cheese, is very nourishing and good for the stomach.<sup>56</sup> In the third book, he mentions many different seasonings and spices, likely borrowed from Martino. They include almonds, cinnamon, pepper, nutmeg, saffron, parsley, basil and onions. In terms of meat, Platina addresses edible birds in the third book and they include peacock, goose, duck and chicken.<sup>57</sup> The sixth book discusses other meats and how to prepare them. “Beef and cow’s meat ought to be boiled, and breast of veal also...”<sup>58</sup> This would obviously be healthier than frying it or cooking it in a pot with butter. After the sixth book, he discusses various sauces, soups, pies, fritters and seafood. Platina provides hundreds of recipes and ideas for preparing all kinds of foods. While not all are healthy by today’s standards, many are hearty and still popular at parties or holiday gatherings. Many of them would undoubtedly have been used by the cooks of Renaissance Italian princes and nobles.

Another major and important source on Renaissance culture is *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldesar Castiglione. The author was an Italian diplomat and soldier from a noble family who wrote the book as a guide for court nobles, after serving the rulers of Urbino in the early sixteenth century.<sup>59</sup> Castiglione led an interesting life, growing up as friends with the Gonzaga princes of Mantua and after his stint at the central Italian court of Urbino, he was appointed papal nuncio to Spain by Pope Clement VII.<sup>60</sup> He began writing *The Book of the Courtier* in 1527, reflecting on time spent at a major center of the Italian Renaissance. Federico de Montefeltro

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 243-51.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>59</sup> Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 10.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

had built Urbino's great palace and large library, turning the city into a center of patronage and learning.<sup>61</sup> It would become one of the great works of the Renaissance; probably second to *The Prince* by Niccoló Machiavelli in terms of influence and giving readers a great insight into humanism. It became the etiquette book for how to serve a prince or ruler. "It is largely a series of echoes: of medieval chivalry, of classical virtues and of contemporary humanist aspirations."<sup>62</sup> Castiglione sought to justify the profession of a courtier, someone who could be a warrior and scholar, a Christian believer and follower of classical ideals, and always a devoted servant.<sup>63</sup> "Throughout Renaissance Europe, his book became essential reading for the nobility."<sup>64</sup> It was widely read and influenced courts across the continent.

In terms of the book's influence on banquets and cuisine, there is little mention of food or grand celebrations. However Castiglione's insights and advice would certainly have impacted nobles and humanists when attending a party or preparing to host one. "The courtier must watch his dress, his speech, his gestures chiefly because of their effect on his reputation."<sup>65</sup> More than anything else, *The Book of the Courtier* would have been especially helpful for the new learned class that did not exist in medieval times. Non-nobles invited to a banquet or dinner party would have read it to understand how to appear, what would be appropriate to talk about, and how to eat and carry on a proper conversation. The discussion about what is a perfect courtier took place during four evenings between an intimate circle of cultivated men, women, scholars and buffoons.<sup>66</sup> The topics of discussion include imitation, noble virtues, beauty, the role of reason, gentlemanly behavior, justice, war and peace. The characters referenced in the fictional

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Castiglione, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 18.

discussions, broken into four books include famous Renaissance people such as Ottaviano Fregoso, an ambassador and later Doge of Venice; Giovan Cristoforo Romano, a sculptor; Elisabetta Gonzaga, daughter of Federico Gonzaga of Mantua; Giuliano de' Medici, son of Lorenzo the Magnificent and brother of Pope Leo X; Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino; and Cardinal Michel de Silva, to whom *The Book of the Courtier* is dedicated.<sup>67</sup>

Life at the court involved service, reflection, and enjoying the finer things in life. “So all day and every day at the Court of Urbino was spent on honourable and pleasing activities both of the body and the mind.”<sup>68</sup> This was clearly a humanist place, where nobles were encouraged and expected to work hard. The balance for living well included not just working, but also exercising, reading and being able to discuss and debate ideas over long dinners. What is also striking is that women played such a large role, at a time when we think of women as not having many rights or being allowed to speak freely. “In essence, the book defines the ideal Renaissance man, and for that matter, woman. (Women were in many ways dominant in the court of early-sixteenth century Urbino).”<sup>69</sup> Throughout *The Book of the Courtier*, women raise questions and are as involved in the discussions as the men. Elisabetta Gonzaga serves as the hostess and often begins the discussion topic. “Let me say that it was custom for all the gentlemen of the house to go, immediately after supper, to the rooms of the Duchess; and there, along with pleasant recreations and enjoyments of various kinds, including constant music and dancing, sometimes intriguing questions were asked...”<sup>70</sup> The women as hostess seem to have a lot of power, a rare occurrence during this era. Again this seems unique and advanced for the time. These conversations were lively, with debate often ensuing, while people also enjoyed

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 23-29.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>69</sup> June Osborne, *Urbino: The Story of a Renaissance City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>70</sup> Castiglione, 44.

music and dancing. No food is mentioned but it is very likely that snacks and drinks were served. Throughout the many varied conversations that occur, one gets the sense that people were well educated or at least informed about the times and the past, with references to classical writers and notions. “They discuss not only how the courtier should behave in matters of etiquette, but also how wide his interests and concerns should be.”<sup>71</sup> Moral virtues are upheld and it is said that parents must teach their children not only to be learned but also polite manners “and correct bearing in eating, drinking, speaking and walking.”<sup>72</sup> This is a great example of the humanist notion of creating well-rounded and virtuous citizens. These nobles understand that this new world includes new realities. Their children need to work and also be educated in the classics and in how to behave. Etiquette at home and in public is emphasized because it was considered so important that people appear and act virtuous. If you did not, then you would be seen as “uncivilized” and perhaps “medieval.”

The last major relevant point made by Castiglione was that princes needed to lead by example. “He should be a prince of great splendour and generosity, giving freely to everyone because, as we say, God is the treasurer of generous rulers. He should hold magnificent banquets, festivals, games and public shows...”<sup>73</sup> Renaissance princes were expected to not only rule but be entertainers and hosts. Showing off one’s wealth and abilities was a way to show relevancy. Humanism and literacy were spreading, as *The Book of the Courtier* was published about sixty years after the invention of the printing press. The humanist emphasis on living life to the fullest, while also being cautious and well behaved is apparent. Rulers who wanted to go down in history weren’t just warriors but also men who displayed good virtues, showed concern for their subjects and could put on a good show for his guests.

---

<sup>71</sup> Osborne, 18.

<sup>72</sup> Castiglione, 291.

<sup>73</sup> Castiglione, 310.

Turning back to Italian Renaissance banquets, there are many common themes as well as some differences, especially due to the location or who was hosting. Written records give us a good insight into what foods were popular, along with decorum, music, and entertainment. “Banquets could also become a matter of overt competition. Without real battles to wage, the Medici, Gonzaga, and papal court fought with their forks.”<sup>74</sup> As wars declined, Italy became more focused on the arts and intellectual pursuits. Courts became centers of learning and feasting. Word traveled about great banquets and celebrations, and so the different dynastic families sought to out do one another to see who could put on the greatest show. “Everything was an elaborate performance in cooking, serving, and eating.”<sup>75</sup> Banquets that hosted foreign dignitaries could also bring together rivals, as diplomacy came before disagreements or competition.<sup>76</sup> So banquets much like today’s international assemblies, could bring rivals together, sort out political differences, and lead to important alliances. “In addition to commemorating weddings, births and deaths, banquets were organized to mark triumphal entries, political unions and religious ordinations.”<sup>77</sup> Banquets clearly served many important purposes throughout the Italian Renaissance.

In terms of what was served at Renaissance Italian banquets, popular meats included fowl and fish, often hunted or caught just before the event.<sup>78</sup> Hunting would have been a leisure activity and privilege of the landed nobility and their guests.<sup>79</sup> Certainly this would not have been too difficult in Italy, especially in the countryside of the more prominent courts in central and northern Italy. As time went on, there was a shift toward lighter, whiter meats such as veal

---

<sup>74</sup> Albala, 6.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>77</sup> Valerie Taylor, “Banquet plate and Renaissance culture: a day in the life,” *Renaissance Studies* 19, no. 5 (November 2005): 621.

<sup>78</sup> Albala, 8.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

and capon, which also meant less hunting was needed or took place.<sup>80</sup> Hunting is not always easy and if one was hosting a large banquet, it may have been hard to plan ahead and get enough meat. The emphasis on eating healthier foods would have been appreciated by the guests and it certainly would be easier to just send a servant to a farm or to even select from young animals raised on your property. This also ties in with the fact that eating lots of food wasn't socially acceptable, nor was wolfing it down.<sup>81</sup> Renaissance banquets would have included lots of conversation, live entertainment, and certainly many courses, but you would take your time eating and would have time in between each course served. "Each course contained a selection of six or more dishes designed to serve from two to four people."<sup>82</sup> Courses of cold foods such as sliced meats, oysters, fruits and cheeses were served at work stations.<sup>83</sup> The influence of Platina could be seen in terms of recommended food that was served at banquets.<sup>84</sup> Presentation was also important, revealing exquisite items like oysters.<sup>85</sup> Banquets also often had a theme, such as Hercules or Venus impersonated by actors or in a sugar sculpture.<sup>86</sup> In the Renaissance, banquets were more about appearances and having fun than gorging on food. The ambiance and company were what really mattered.

The Italian Renaissance banquet was developed and refined at the d'Este court in Ferrara.<sup>87</sup> The Este family had ruled the city-state since the thirteenth century and made it a major and innovative center of the new civilization through art, music, humanism and the revival of classical comedy.<sup>88</sup> "The citizens of Ferrara ate well. The weather was damp and cold in

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>82</sup> Taylor, 623.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Albala, 10.

<sup>86</sup> Albala, 14.

<sup>87</sup> Roy Strong, *Feast: A History of Grand Eating* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2002), 132.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

winter, but hot in summers and the fertile soil of the Po plain made for ideal agricultural conditions.”<sup>89</sup> The great banquets of the d’Este not only displayed their great wealth and power, but served as a way to communicate their strength to other states.<sup>90</sup> The Ferrarese court was also the most distinctive in terms of Renaissance food consumption.<sup>91</sup> “The Este court aspired to grandeur, in the way that provincial centers often do, and tried hard to emulate the magnificence of the royal courts of Burgundy and France.”<sup>92</sup> Their lavish banquets and celebrations have been recorded and gone down in history as some of the grandest in modern Europe. In general, Renaissance banquets were not just about eating and drinking, but were also designed to appeal to the eyes and ears as well as the palate.<sup>93</sup> Originality was key and so lots of time went into planning, preparing, decorating, selecting entertainment and music, along with putting together the menu and choosing the wines.<sup>94</sup>

Some of the most famous Renaissance banquets were hosted by Cardinal Ippolito d’Este. A recorded example took place on May 20, 1529 when the future cardinal entertained his brother Ercole II, duke of Ferrara at Belfiore palace.<sup>95</sup> At the time, Ippolito was archbishop of Milan and he would go on to become one of the richest and most prodigal of Renaissance cardinals.<sup>96</sup> Fifty four guests were at the party which included a table built in the gardens for the occasion, live musicians and fifteen sugar sculptures of figures such as Venus, Cupid and Bacchus to represent gardens, love and wine.<sup>97</sup> “Once the guests were seated they were handed bowls of scented

---

<sup>89</sup> Mary Hollingsworth, *The Cardinal’s Hat: Money, Ambition and Everyday Life in the Court of a Borgia Prince* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>90</sup> Albala, 5.

<sup>91</sup> Strong, 132.

<sup>92</sup> Hollingsworth, 14.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Strong, 129.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

water to wash their hands before starting on the hors-d'oeuvres...<sup>98</sup> The first course began with ceremonial music played by three trombones and three horns, with a boiled sturgeon centerpiece, decorated with Ippolito's own coat-of-arms picked out in garlic and red sauce.<sup>99</sup> There were nine courses for the meal and each course had eight different dishes.<sup>100</sup> The courses included antipasti, trout patties, pike spleens but no meat as it was a day of abstinence.<sup>101</sup> Each course had its own music or form of spectacle and the party did not end until 5:00 A.M.<sup>102</sup> Ippolito d'Este designed the most elaborate banquet possible for his brother and it has gone down in history as one of the most ornate banquets from the period.

Another Este family tradition which included a meal began on Maundy Thursday in 1491 and would continue as an annual tradition. Thirteen poor citizens were invited and people sat at tables according to their social status.<sup>103</sup> It was supposed to commemorate the Last Supper of Jesus Christ and was hosted by the duke himself.<sup>104</sup> The meal included sturgeon fish, a roast course of wild boar and other meats accompanied by red wine.<sup>105</sup> "After the feast everyone adjourned to another hall where the Este family, headed by the duke acting the part of Christ, washed the feet of the poor. The public was admitted to view the spectacle."<sup>106</sup> This account is a good example of another type of banquet, not a celebration for a visitor or a wedding, but an annual religious tradition that included invited citizens and a religious component. The washing of the feet remains a Holy Thursday tradition in Catholic churches. This tradition of the Este is an interesting one because it shows that they were not just focused on having fun and hosting

---

<sup>98</sup> Hollingsworth, 21.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>100</sup> Strong, 130.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Strong, 133.

elaborate parties for nobles and family members. They understood that staying in power required not just showing off to their fellow peers, but also serving the community, which was generally poor. Appearing to show compassion and giving a lavish meal for the poor must have been an event that many who experienced it would not forget.

Another good example of a lavish celebration comes from the first year of the reign of Pope Leo X, a member of Florence's famous Medici family. In September 1513, just five months after he became pope, Leo held an elaborate celebration for his brother and nephew who were made honorary Roman citizens.<sup>107</sup> Rome had returned as the papal center less than a century before, after the Great Schism. The city was once again becoming a major center of trade and learning, inhabited largely by members of the clergy. Leo's predecessor Julius II became one of the most famous popes for his patronage of great Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo. Rome was undergoing a great revival of rebuilding and would surpass Florence as the center of the Italian Renaissance. The city government, not Leo X, came up with the idea for the public celebration that took place.<sup>108</sup> "Leo's early gestures of benevolence toward the Roman people had raised high hope for local prosperity and for a greater measure of autonomy."<sup>109</sup> The celebration would become an historic one, in many ways showing off the new, modern Rome. The ceremonies were held on the occasion of the *Palilia*, a pagan festival of the goddess Pales which had been the goddess of Imperial Rome.<sup>110</sup> The entertainment took place at Capitoline Hill, Rome's civic center.<sup>111</sup> After mass, there was a Latin oration that focused on the Medici family, followed by a banquet.<sup>112</sup> "This banquet is one of the few from

---

<sup>107</sup> Bonner Mitchell, *Rome in The High Renaissance: The Age of Leo X* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 61.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>110</sup> Mitchell, 62.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 68.

the Renaissance for which we have a complete listing of courses.”<sup>113</sup> There were more than twenty courses, each of them announced by the sounding of trumpets.<sup>114</sup> The meal lasted at least four hours and some Roman citizens lent gold and silver dishes for the occasion.<sup>115</sup> The first course consisted of sweetmeats, which were not common at the time and was followed by a variety of meat dishes.<sup>116</sup> Some of the meats included peacocks, a calf, and a boar, and they were all arranged in natural postures and brought out on trays.<sup>117</sup> This reflects back to Imperial Rome, especially the notion of serving peacock. It would seem that this banquet was definitely trying to recreate an ancient Roman experience in the same city that was being reborn. “Buffoons moved about constantly, cutting capers and making jokes.”<sup>118</sup> It is said that people stuffed themselves, again a more ancient than modern practice.<sup>119</sup> After eating, the banquet ended and guests went to watch a pageant of skits.<sup>120</sup> This would be one notable in a series of new ceremonies that bound together the Romans in a civic pride.<sup>121</sup> This banquet and its ensuing entertainment is another good example from Renaissance Italy. However it is also unique because it seems to follow a more ancient than modern practice. The entertainment included ancient Roman themes and people were encouraged to gorge, something that Platina would frown upon. It makes sense though that this type of banquet would occur in Rome and not Ferrara or Urbino. The message was that Rome had been great and would become great again, thanks to new buildings, the return of many people and the papacy, and patronage of education and the arts.

---

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Mitchell, 68.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 77.

In conclusion, the Italian Renaissance witnessed not just the revival of classical learning and the birth of the modern world in the arts and education, but also significant changes and advances in cuisine and gastronomy. It is clear that Martino, Platina and Castiglione all had a major impact on Italy and courtly banquets. Their written works reflect a humanist understanding of the world, along with their travels and life experiences living and working around the Italian Peninsula. The humanist emphasis on being well balanced impacted views of cooking and gastronomy and the desire for conversation about intellectual ideas over a meal, a new phenomenon. Martino's use of vegetables would take awhile to become popular, especially since the tomato would not start to be used in Italian cooking until the nineteenth century. Platina's focus on a balanced diet and the ideal of moderation when eating would be observed in many dinner parties and banquets. Castiglione reemphasized medieval courtly practices and traditions, influencing many European courts in terms of table etiquette and conversation, along with how one should behave and best serve his prince. Not everything changed in terms of food and cuisine when the Renaissance began. New tastes did not displace spicy and fragrant foods of the late Middle Ages.<sup>122</sup> People continued to enjoy foods with flavor, and spices became more widely available with new trade routes and increased commerce first with the East and then with the West, thanks to the discovery of the Americas. In terms of looking to the past, courts sought to emulate the banquets of antiquity, due in large part to the recovery and printing of texts which related directly to ancient cuisine.<sup>123</sup> These are examples of how Renaissance cooking and gastronomy combined elements from the ancient, medieval and modern worlds. People wanted to look backward and forward. Many nobles wanted to relive the past and certainly many famous Renaissance banquets did just that. This new era would not last forever, but its

---

<sup>122</sup> Strong, 138.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

gastronomy and cuisine endures. Martino's emphasis on consuming vegetables is very popular today and seen as necessary to include for a healthy diet. Platina's notion of not overeating and seeking a balanced, healthy life is certainly not disputed by anyone. While banquets are no longer common, proper etiquette and appearance is still promoted and upheld from the business lunch to the formal dinner party. These three Italian men contributed greatly to the Renaissance and their ideas and words continue to impact people today without the diners even knowing who they were.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albala, Ken. *The Banquet: Dining in the Great Courts of Late Renaissance Europe*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.
- Capatti, Alberto and Massimo Montanari. *Italian Cuisine: A Cultural History*. Translated by Aine O’Healy. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Castiglione, Baldesar. *The Book of the Courtier*. Translated by George Bull. London: Penguin Books, 1967.
- Hollingsworth, Mary. *The Cardinal’s Hat: Money, Ambition, and Everyday Life in the Court of a Borgia Prince*. New York: The Overlook Press, 2005.
- Martino, Maestro. *The Art of Cooking*. Edited and with an introduction by Luigi Ballerini. Translated and annotated by Jeremy Parzen. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Milham, Mary Ella. “Martino and His De Re Coquinaria.” *Medieval Food and Drink XXI*, (1995): 61-65.
- Mitchell, Bonner. *Rome in The High Renaissance: The Age of Leo X*. Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1973.
- Osborne, June. *Urbino: The Story of a Renaissance City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Parasecoli, Fabio. *Food Culture in Italy*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004.
- Platina, Bartolomeo. *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*. Translated and edited by Mary Ella Milham. Tempe: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998.
- Strong, Roy. *Feast: A History of Grand Eating*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2002.
- Taylor, Valerie. “Banquet plate and Renaissance culture: a day in the life.” *Renaissance Studies*, 19, no. 5 (November 2005): 621-633.