

Food and Power in Renaissance & Baroque Italy: Searching for the Visual Evidence

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There are many written accounts of power banquets during this period, but not so much visual evidence.¹ Here is a selection of images which can add to what we find elsewhere about the relationship between food and power.

A peacock with its tail feathers splayed out like a fan was perhaps the most dramatic visual expression of power in a Renaissance banquet. It was cooked then reclad in its feathers and presented upright to the delight of the guests. Its brilliant plumage had more appeal than its somewhat boring dry flesh, but together they were a potent symbol of both imperial political power and Christian supremacy. The glory of the splayed-out tail feathers symbolised imperial, secular power, while the flesh of the peacock was held to be incorruptible, since it did not go 'off' when cooked, and so could refer to the immortality of Christ.

Maestro Martino de' Rossi explained how to prepare it in a version of his *Libro de Arte Coquinaria*, from the 1460s. The bird is not plucked but skinned carefully, then the skin is put to one side, with a preservative mixture of salt and spices, while the flesh is roasted, with its stuffing of aromatic herbs and spices. The skin and feathers are then stitched back onto the cooked bird, now covered with more spices and a layer of gold leaf, leaving this hidden show of extravagant wealth to be revealed by chance as the carver gets to work. Sometimes a clockwork mechanism concealed within the carcass of the peacock allowed it to strut along the table, and when an inflammable bit of cloth within its beak is set alight the effect was even more impressive. We can see a version of this in the manuscript account of the marriage of Costanzo Sforza to Camilla of Aragon at Pesaro in May 1474.² Printed copies of the text were circulated only a few months after the wedding, which implies a formidable organisation ahead of the event, a political statement spelt out loud and clear, not just the trappings of a posh wedding. The marriage linked the Pesaro branch of the powerful Sforza family to the Aragonese rulers of Naples, thus emphasising the combined power of Milan, Florence, Naples and Spain, in the confusing tangle of alliances and enmities between the city states of Italy. Published and manuscript versions of this account spell out in tedious detail the events, covering many days, as the bride was escorted from Fano to Pesaro, in the Italian Marches, stopping on the way for entertainments and refreshments, offered with much pomp and pageantry. Some of this consisted of re-enactments of classical myths, cultural and artistic displays, rather than the warlike exhibitions of crude military power that had characterised medieval banquets. But crude political power was the motive behind this display of culture and elegance,

and the publication of the detailed, not to say long-winded account of the event in the same year was meant to ram home the political importance of the marriage.

Descriptions of the food have been translated and analysed by Jane Bridgman in *A Renaissance Wedding* showing how the food was mainly in the tradition of Medieval banquets rather than the New Cuisine of Martino and his Humanist friends and patrons, while the entertainments were in the new taste of the Italian Renaissance.

The peacock was not the only bird to preside over a banquet. In 1454 the Feast of the Pheasant was organised in Lille on 17 February by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, and his son Charles the Bold, to enrol the great and the good in a crusade to free Constantinople from the Turks. A pheasant was the symbol of this aspiration; guests, including kings and high-ranking prelates swore an oath, on the long-suffering bird, to join the crusade. Which never happened. But the pheasant, resplendent in its plumage, was probably only one of many birds that were presented at the banquet, beautifully cooked, and put back in their feathers, but although the magnificence of the entremets or between courses entertainments, in the International Gothic style, was chronicled by many contemporary observers, none of them got around to describing the food. So, splendid though the gastronomy was, we know precious little about it. The political message was what mattered.

Equally sparse are the details of the food in the *Tres Riches Heures* of the Duke Charles of Berry. As a member of the French royal family the duke was a powerful, and spendthrift, patron of the arts. The Limbourg Brothers were commissioned in 1412 to produce this lavishly illuminated Book of Hours, essentially a prayer book, but with contributions for the Labours of the Months, where January is best spent by the nobility in the competitive exchange of presents in the course of a banquet. We are shown little of the food; the damask tablecloth is spread with gold and silver plates and vessels, more of which can be seen in the *credenza* on the left where the ritual tasting of the wine is taking place, on the right there is the ornate gold *nef*, a salt cellar in the form of a galleon. The elaborate rituals of serving are implied rather than portrayed, by the two richly dressed individuals standing before the table, one of them, draped in the long-embroidered napkin of the carver or master of ceremonies, gesturing with his knife, having presented a dish of dismembered animal parts, cut up so that they can be eaten comfortably in the fingers, after dipping in the sauces. The whole point of the image is to emphasize the wealth and splendour of the occasion,

both in the use of gold and lapis lazuli by the artist, and the elaborately embroidered blue and gold robes of the Duke. We know from other sources that the food would have been equally rich, complex and vibrant with spices and costly flavourings, brightly coloured with saffron and sanders, but here it is sludge-coloured stuff, dumped on dishes in perfunctory profusion. The artist and patron clearly were concerned more with the splendour of the setting than with the food, the expensive textiles, furnishings and tableware being more tangible signs of wealth and power than the fragrant but ephemeral meat and fish dishes.

A century later we have a very different patron, Agostino Chigi, who had the clout to persuade Raphael to drop a commission from the Pope, to come and decorate his country villa by the Tiber, in what is now Trastevere.³ Raphael's colleague Giovanni da Udine, painted the festoons of vegetation, of huge interest to plant historians, on the spandrels of the vaulted ceiling of the Loggia di Psiche, in what is now the Farnesina. It could also have been the setting for some of Chigi's famous banquets, where the edible fruit and vegetables in the frescos indoors were a visual link to the plants in Chigi's famous gardens and orchards. But the most notorious of these banquets was held in a pavilion built at one end of his garden, close enough to the river for servants to ostentatiously chuck into the Tiber the gold and silver dishes on which the many courses of the meal had been served, only to retrieve them after the guests had departed from the concealed nets in which they safely swam. Some of these costly items are listed in the inventory hastily compiled after Chigi's unexpectedly early death in 1520. This manic gesture had a hard edge. It was about power, not political power, but financial power. Chigi's trading and banking network spread throughout Europe and beyond, with kings and pontiffs manipulated like the golden dishes in the nets of his loans. Lorenzo the Magnificent in Florence, and Pope Leo X, another Medici, often one of the banquet guests, and rulers of the Venetian Republic, relied on Chigi to finance their undertakings, while Chigi relied to some extent on their capacity to enhance his *magnificenza*, a word that implies far more than 'magnificence', with cultural and social overtones that money could not buy, but in his case did. Chigi was a collector and connoisseur of works of art, and things of beauty. He acquired ancient Greek and Roman statues and jewellery, he commissioned modern paintings and sculpture, and displayed them in this new villa ??? in the idyllic about to be developed countryside on the opposite bank of the Tiber, away from the chaotic squalor of the city centre. The paintings in the Loggia di Psiche were a celebration of fertility and fecundity, the fruit and vegetables all items in his extensive gardens, with their profusion of everyday ingredients, posh vegetables asparagus and artichokes, and rare and exotic plants from the New World, only twenty years after their arrival in Europe. It was the power of money that made all this possible and left us with this visual evidence of his plant collection in the frescos of the Loggia

di Psiche long after Chigi's other collections were dispersed amidst the recriminations of his creditors and heirs.

Half a century later, in 1570, Bartolomeo Scappi published his monumental *Opera*.⁴ A big section of this lists hundreds of banquet menus, some of them naming the powerful guests. The engraved illustrations to the book show Scappi's ideal kitchens and pantries, the pots and pans and equipment he used, but not the feasts in progress. When we turn to the banquet scenes by his contemporary Veronese in Venice, in bible stories executed for religious houses, showing events like the Marriage at Caana, or the Feast in the House of Levy, all in modern settings of magnificent splendour, with the local nobility in opulent dress, musicians playing, and all the trappings of a powerful present day elite, we see very little of the food that was being served and eaten. The chief steward is there, in striped silk robes, overseeing the noise and bustle, bordering on confusion, that are absent from Scappi's rational accounts of feasts. A pensive guest picks his teeth with a two-pronged fork (that was what they were supplied for), others wave and call for items to be brought by the flock of servants, but the food itself lurks unidentifiable along the tables. For that we have to abandon Veronese's power banquets and look at the bible stories depicted by the Bassano del Ponte family in Bassano del Grappa, in the Veneto.

Here we can see in great detail the preparation of food, the ingredients, kitchens and dining tables of the artist's well-off clients. This was their daily life, and they were happy to have it depicted with such a profusion of good things. Lurking in the background was a bible story, in a setting of magical realism, partly indoors, partly outdoors, in kitchens of Palladian splendour, and Piranesian fantasy, where classical ruins morphed into kitchen sinks and open hearths, with the bible story tucked away on one side, and a flurry of domesticity in the foreground, with pies, open tarts and cooked dishes, a familiar kitchen cat, sulky pot boy, buxom young woman with braided golden hair, and the red-capped weary master cook, and always looming in the background the silhouette of Monte Grappa (from which the drink got its name). The mountain appears in all weathers, luminous or mist-shrouded, with appealing details of rural life, as well as brilliant atmospheric effects.

But it is in a historical subject by Bassano, Cleopatra's Feast, that we see the ultimate in power dining in a contemporary setting. Anthony and Cleopatra vied with each other to present the most expensive repast. As each costly dish was brought in from the kitchen, overseen by the familiar red-capped cook, it was piled up overlapping the plates already on the table, like a Chinese banquet meal. Now at last we get a sighting of how those amazingly long menus worked, with guests tasting a little from the dishes they could reach, seated according to a complex pecking order, and if lucky having more passed down the table. The artist shows the moment when Cleopatra dissolves a priceless pearl earring in a bowl of vinegar, and swigs it down, with Anthony rendered defeated and speechless.

Another queen, Christina of Sweden, is shown in a pen and ink sketch, and a watercolour version of it, by Pierre Paul Sévin, showing a banquet offered her by Pope Clement IX in 1668. Although her abdication from the throne in 1654 had freed her from the humdrum routines of government Christina continued to represent her country abroad, enjoying the ceremonial welcome appropriate for royalty. She had enough self-knowledge to admit that she was bored by the nitty-gritty of a monarch's duties, but fascinated by the mechanics and metaphysics of power, attracted to the Catholic faith, and at the same time unwilling to provide the heirs a northern Protestant kingdom required. She had the courage to extricate herself from a life she was unsuited for and settled for the hedonism of life in Baroque Rome, visiting several times and eventually settling there. June di Schino has investigated these visits and analysed the menus of the many banquets offered Christina as she travelled across Italy to Rome; her analysis of a manuscript account of one of these visits, in the Casanatense Library in Rome, is essential to our understanding of these events.⁵ It was on one of these visits, that Christina commissioned the artist Sévin to record this banquet and the table settings in sketches, now preserved in the Nationalmuseum Stockholm. We can see how the dynamics of power dining were applied to the seating arrangements and serving of this banquet. The Pope and Christina were shown on a raised dais with an awning over the pontiff's throne. He was at the geometric centre of this, seated on a proper throne, while Christina was placed to his right, on a mere chair, though with arms. Her section of the table was lower than his, and was only just covered by the awning. The correct protocol pleased Christina, but she was hugely enthusiastic about the *trionfi* made of sugar, after designs by Bernini. We have seen how elaborate table decorations were flaunted in early periods, armed men would erupt from a wooden castle, or songbirds fly out of a massive pie, to twitter round the room, spreading delight and chaos. Bernini's designs were subtler; the sugar comfits and sweetmeats of the past had evolved into ornamental figures cast in sugar, from moulds similar to those used for sculpture. These were more than just a pretty face, you could eat them on the spot, which almost amounted to vandalism, or nick them and take them home, as Christina did, to treasure the artistry and symbolism involved. Sévin's sketches give an idea of the effect of this exuberant baroque table decoration. Sugar was expensive and the use of such a costly ingredient for an edible, ephemeral table decoration, is an indication of the power and wealth of the host and his guest.

Ornate table decoration was part of the power structure of meals organised in the late seventeenth century by Antonio Latini for his employer, Don Stefano Carrillo y Salcedo, one of the highest jobs, first minister of the Kingdom of Naples. Naples had been under Spanish rule for ... and as well as being one of the largest cities in Italy it

was on the way to becoming the pleasure capital of Europe. Latini wrote *Lo Scalco alla Moderna* in 1692-94, towards the end of an awesomely professional career, analysed with sympathy and insight by Tommaso Astarita in a collection of essays and translations of key selections from over 1000 pages.⁶ We can study the structure of a regal banquet or the carefully orchestrated excursions to Don Stefano's country estate at Torre del Greco, twelve kilometres outside Naples, in April and May, (he gives the month but not the year). Latini appreciated the value of getting a bunch of high-powered nobles and diplomats away from the stresses of city life and courtly intrigue, to ruminate in relaxed surroundings on matters of state. The food could help to reinforce musings on the balance of power between an alien ruling elite and the local population, or the complex issues of foreign policy, or the ever-present restless murmurings of The Mob. The appearance in a banquet menu of a rich *oglia* which included along with delicate meats and fowl some chickpeas and a whole head or two of garlic, and in some versions tomatoes and possibly chilli pepper, could hardly have been intended as crude joke about the eating habits of the lower orders in Spain or Naples, more likely a reference to the way the addition of the fresh herbs and vegetables of the countryside around Naples and parts of Spain could lift a rather gross posh recipe to a new level of sophistication, anticipating by almost a century the refined and fragrant vegetable recipes of Vincenzo Corrado. The chickpeas and garlic could have been a simple gesture of solidarity between Naples and Spain, or a reminder that new simpler recipes were beginning to appear. One dish in particular, served to a group of gentlemen on a trip to Posilippo, was such a success that they never touched the other eleven on offer. It had in it, as well as the chickpeas and garlic, delicate meats, various green vegetables, celery, cardoons, mushrooms, truffles, shellfish, perfumed with saffron, fresh herbs and pistachios. The trip to Torre del Greco ended with aristocratic ladies dancing (in the streets?), while refreshments - cold drinks, ice cream, chilled chocolate, fresh fruit embedded in pyramids of ice were presented to the guests. The leftovers were offered to the supporting cast of over 300, including coachmen, huntsmen, grooms, mariners and many more. Thus, making sure that the grateful populace lined the streets shouting 'Viva! viva!' to the Viceroy and the Regent as they made their way back to Naples. A perfect example of how food could influence the ruling powers on one level whilst exercising subtle crowd control on another.

The final image shows the power of food to trigger memories, as Christ and two pilgrims stop off at Emmaus on their way home after the Resurrection. The familiar meal and the familiar gesture of blessing the bread, brought astonished recognition of their travelling companion to the two disciples. Caravaggio was here using the power of memory, and the impact of everyday food to reinforce the message of the Counter Reformation.

About the author

Gillian Riley is an English food writer. She was born and brought up in Yorkshire, read History at Cambridge, and after obtaining a diploma in education went to live in London where she worked as a designer in print and publishing, combining this with part-time teaching. Study trips to Italy in pursuit of lettering and inscriptions fuelled a passion for the history of Italian gastronomy which gradually took over her life. Her illustrated translation of Giacomo Castelvetro's *The Fruit, Herbs & Vegetables of Italy* was published in 1989. Then followed three titles in the Painters & Food series for Pomegranate Books: *Renaissance Recipes, Impressionist Picnics*, and *The Dutch Table. Food in Art*, Reaktion Books (2015), covers earliest times to the Renaissance. *The Oxford Companion to Italian Food*, Oxford University Press (2007) describes contemporary Italian food in its historic background. She is currently working on a biography of Ulisse Aldrovandi, the sixteenth-century naturalist.

Notes

1. Kaori O'Connor, *The Never-ending Feast* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Roy Strong, *Feast, a history of grand eating* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002); Ken Albala, *The Banquet, dining in the great courts of*

- Renaissance Europe (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Claudio Benporat, *Feste e Banchetti* (Milan: Leo S, Olschki, 2001).
2. Janet Bridgeman, *A Renaissance Wedding* (London/Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2013); Claudio Benporat, *Feste e banchetti* (Milan: Leo S. Olschki, 2001).
3. Giulia Caneva, *Il Mondo di Cerere nell Loggia di Psiche* (Rome: Fratelli Polombi, 1998); Costanza Barbieri, *Le 'Magnificenze' di Agostino Chigi* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2013).
4. Bartolomeo Scappi, *Opera dell' Arte del Cucinare* (Venice 1570, facsimile Bologna: Arnaldo Forni, 1981); Terence Scully, translation and commentary, *The Opera of Bartolomeo Scappi* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2008).
5. June di Schino, *Tre Banchetti in onore di Cristina di Svezia* (Rome: Accademia Italiana della Cucina, 2000); June di Schino ed., *I Fasti del Banchetto Barocco* (Rome: Diomeda Centro Studi, 2005); June di Schino, *Arte Dolciaria Barocca* (Rome: Gangemi, 2016).
6. Antonio Latini, *Lo Scalco alla Moderna*, Part 1, (Naples: Parino & Mutii, 1692), Part 2, (Naples: Parino & Mutii, 1694); Facsimile Milan: *Appunti di Gastronomia*, 1993; Tommaso Astarita, *The Italian Baroque Table* (Tempe Arizona: ACMRS, 2014).