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Medieval Cookbooks



THE FIRST ITALIAN manuscripts containing recipes for cooking appeared in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the latter part of the Middle Ages. They reveal a culture already definable as Italian, while moving toward a broader European scope. The kind of cooking proposed by these texts is not local but rather international, a kind of *koiné* with many common aspects and recipes that recur in various regions of Europe.¹ To go beyond the “territorial” (which only recently has become a requisite in gastronomic culture) represented a prestigious objective in the Middle Ages, and, for the upper classes (the direct or indirect audience for these cookbooks), it indicated a kind of “artificial” cooking, a repertory that could be shared because it was not restricted by local boundaries.² Within this framework, however, “regional” and “national” characteristics were not absent. The circulation of recipes and productions did not exclude the existence of differences; in a way, it presupposed them. Neither did it exclude the possibility of singling out within a European context more circumscribed areas of cultural identity, or “regional” and “national” gastronomic models—although they, too, were defined not by their ties to the resources and traditions of a particular territory but, on the contrary, by the circulation of individual territorial experiences within a broader framework.

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time, they incorporate local usages from the entire peninsula. What emerges is a common culture within a geographic and cultural space that still today defines itself as Italy, determined by exchanges among the various regions—or, more accurately, among the cities, because in Italy it is the city that generates gastronomic culture and culture in the broader sense.³ All this has important implications at the level of history because it shows how the sharing of a culture⁴ creates the identity of a nation even more than its institutions. Politically, Italy did not exist during the Middle Ages (and would not exist before the end of the second half of the nineteenth century). But, culturally, it was a vital reality well-known to contemporaries of the period. And because cuisine is culture, it was also through the flavors and models of taste that this Italian identity manifested itself. This is what Salimbene da Parma, the thirteenth-century monk-chronicler, had in mind when he commented that “the red wines of Auxerre [Burgundy] are not as good as the red wines of Italy.”⁵

Here, then, in the earliest Italian cookbooks, do we find references to dishes that evoke local customs of the peninsula.⁶ The oldest among them, the *Liber de coquina* from southern Italy, offers recipes for cabbage “in the Roman style,” for greens “in the style of Campania,” and for beans in the style of “Marca di Treviso.” Among ingredients, it mentions wheat from the Puglie and pasta from Genoa, and among products, it speaks of “Lombard compote,” or what is known today as the relish *mostarda di Cremona*. Other fourteenth-century cookbooks speak of “Roman pastello,” the torte from “Lavagna,” and salt from Sardinia or from Chioggia.

We should not place too much faith in these denominations, for in many cases they may be occasional or celebratory names and not necessarily tied to local cooking traditions. To give an example, Giovanni Reborà maintains that the *torta lavagnese* is not a gastronomic preparation of Ligurian tradition but a dish intended to celebrate the ascension to the pontificate of Sinibaldo Fieschi of the family of the counts of Lavagna.⁷ In other cases, the geographic designation seems more trustworthy on the level of gastronomy; however, it is not this that needs to be stressed but rather the fact that such denominations—leaving aside the real meaning of each one—indicate that people *believed* in the existence of local specialties. As Flandrin wrote, “Whatever may have been the true origin of national and regional cuisines, it is obvious that people of the time distinguished one from the other.”⁸

That “local” culture was in some way shared and that this signified the factual existence of an “Italian cuisine”—understood as the common ground of exchange between diverse realities—are proved more by the recipes than by denominations, as well as by the effective circulation of those texts within the Italian territory, starting with two principal areas of diffusion that scholars have individuated as the Swabian-Angevine kingdom and the Tuscan commune.⁹

It was probably in the Angevine court of Naples in the early fourteenth century that the previously mentioned *Liber de coquina* was written, although based on her recent research, Anna Martellotti¹⁰ holds that it was derived from a text of the previous century, compiled in Sicily at the Palermo court of Frederick II. The “southernness” of this cookbook was asserted by Marianne Mulon, the first to publish the text,¹¹ and her characterization was confirmed by the acute observations of Sada and Valente, based not only on formal aspects (many linguistic voices belonging to the “dialectal sources common to the Italian south,” with particular emphasis, in the Angevine text, on “Neapolitan and Pugliese elements”) but also on substantive ones (products and recipes traceable to the culture of southern Italy).¹² Thus, despite the objections raised by Bruno Laurioux,¹³ the cookbook’s “southernness” cannot be questioned. Its text is nonetheless an expression of a syncretic culture, international by nature, such as the one that was then in force in Europe and that was, in the case of southern Italy, particularly receptive to Arab influences.

From *Liber de coquina*, written in Latin, others were derived and translated into Italian vernacular, with various adjustments to local dialects such as the *Libro della cucina* (literally, the book of cooking) by an anonymous Tuscan at the end of the fourteenth century and the various texts of the following century—“variants” that Bruno Laurioux patiently examined in archives and libraries, arriving at the conclusion that “the *Liber de coquina* in its various incarnations was utilized until the end of the fifteenth century and was known all over Italy, and even beyond the peninsula, in France and Germany.”¹⁴ The book’s European success can perhaps be explained by the fact that the fourteenth-century text was written in Latin, an “international” language. As for Italy, the geographic and chronological vastness of this circulation is the proof—and, in part, the instrument—of a gastronomic culture widely shared, though assuredly not homogeneous.

The same holds true for the second generation of cookbooks, whose earliest example was found in a manuscript from 1338–39, written in Tuscany, probably Siena. From there, it would seem to have radiated in all directions: manuscripts inspired by the Tuscan cookbook, with various adaptations of content and language, appeared between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Bologna, Liguria, and the Veneto (in Venetian dialect) and in the south. If the family ties among these manuscripts are generally accepted, their relations are not assured, and among scholars, important differences of interpretation can be seen. Unlike the first group of cookbooks, these later ones never left Italy. On the other hand, they remained in circulation much longer—until the sixteenth century—traveling throughout the peninsula.¹⁵

The differing cultural and social orientations of the two groups of manuscripts (on the one side, the royal court of Palermo or Naples; on the other, a city of communal Italy) are reflected in the differing styles of the texts. Whereas those in the first group are directed toward a readership of gentry, explicitly stated in some of the recipes (for example, “Prepare the soup, add spices and serve to the lord along with the peacock”), those in the second refer to a group of friends: “twelve gluttons” (*XII gluttonous gentlemen*, *XII rich hedonists*) is repeated many times in the recipes with an insistence on the idea of “wealth,” which does not evoke traditional nobility but rather the new aristocracy of money.¹⁶ It is not the court but the house that is the point of reference in the second group of texts—not the nobility but the upper “bourgeoisie,” a term, by the way, to be used with caution in a social context like that of medieval Italian cities, which viewed the families of traditional nobility and the new classes of merchants, artisans, and professionals as extremely mixed both in the exercise of power and in cultural models.

What appears to be very important is the specification—completely “bourgeois”—in the second group of texts, which provide the exact quantities of ingredients and look to costs and shopping. The *Liber de coquina* and the cookbooks stemming from it do not stoop to such details, limiting themselves to broader indications, on the assumption either that they are addressing cooks who are already well versed (and who must also have been the readers of the texts) or that their primary function was as a tribute to the lord, almost an object of display to celebrate the prestige of his table.

We can therefore imagine a bi-level reading of these texts: one “for show,” intended for the buyers, the rich hedonists or the nobility; and the

other more technical, intended for the cooks who served at their tables. To the latter are directed the warnings and the advice: on the subject of eel pie, “let it cool a bit or the rich people will burn their mouths”; when preparing ravioli, “make the dough extremely thin or it will not please the rich.”¹⁷ As for the cooks, however, there is an explicit recognition of their autonomy. It is almost taken for granted that they will freely vary the flavors and ingredients in the recipes according to market availability, their own ingenuity, and the tastes of the diner.¹⁸ If one thinks of the typology of the buyers and readers for whom these cookbooks were intended, one cannot imagine a readership potentially more varied and extensive among urban dwellers. Apart from the rich bourgeois and the nobility, there was surely no dearth of ordinary inquisitive people, gluttons, and gastronomes, such those seen in literary sources as avid readers of culinary manuscripts. Gentile Sermini, a fourteenth-century writer, created the character of an epicurean monk, one Meoccio, who disguised his favorite cookbook as a breviary, which he read assiduously, pretending to be immersed in pious contemplation: the “breviary” was “entirely filled with recipes by cooks describing all the dishes and delicacies that could be made, how they should be cooked, with what herbs, and in what season; and it was all this and nothing else that filled his mind.”¹⁹

There may also be a third type of manuscript—namely, *Fait de la cuisine*, a cookbook compiled by Maître Chiquart, cook at the court of Savoy in the fifteenth century.²⁰ But this is a work outside the circulation of recipe books within “Italy,” more related to French customs even if it functioned as a bridge between the two cultural areas. Italy in the Middle Ages, and at least until the end of the sixteenth century, was an Italy without Piedmont.²¹ The situation would slowly change, and, paradoxically, it would be Piedmont that constructed a political Italy.

After talking about manuscripts, indicating two principal families and a few avenues of diffusion of these two textual branches, we should now point out that these derivations are the subject of heated discussions among scholars. The fact is that derivations are never simple: they do not exclude—on the contrary, they regularly foresee—phenomena of selection and incorporation, cuts and additions, modifications and adaptations, all of which are inevitable in the case of texts for practical use such as recipe books. All this makes the work of philological reconstruction fascinating, but it would be hopeless to try to do this with criteria analogous to those used for literary texts. Scholars hypothesize the existence

of lost codices from which others, apparently similar but in many ways divergent, might have been derived. They note the way entire parts were “forgotten” when a text passed from one region to another, as in the case of the Tuscan text, derived from the southern *Liber de coquina*, which omitted all recipes for saltwater fish for unfathomable reasons. In cases like these, the very notion of “variants” is inadequate. In short, the world of culinary manuscripts poses insoluble problems in view of the methodologies that have been honed and consolidated with regard to philology. Differences in dating related to physical aspects (typology of the writing materials, style of handwriting, etc.) are compounded by differences in evaluation of the contents: analysis of the recipes suggests a derivation of B from A in some instances and of A from B in others. The problems remain unresolved, and much of what has been written until now could be turned inside out like a glove tomorrow. But even this is the beauty of research.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, Maestro Martino de Rossi, the first important author in the history of Italian cooking, produced *Libro de arte coquinaria* (The book of culinary art). Despite its Latinate title, he wrote in the Italian vernacular, which marks a veritable leap in quality and content beyond the formal, compared with the earlier literature on this subject.²² A native of the Ticino,* from the valley of Blenio, he is the exemplar of an interregional culture that traversed the entire peninsula. He worked in Milan at the ducal court of Francesco Sforza (presumably between 1461 and 1462) and then in Rome, at first in the service of Ludovico Trevisan, patriarch of Aquileia, and later at the papal court, where he held the delicate position of *cuoco secreto*, or private cook, to at least two popes, Paul II and Sixtus IV. During those decades, he became closer to the humanist Bartolomeo Sacchi, known as Il Platina, with whom he may have devised and executed the cookbook. After 1484, he was back in Milan, in the service of the great condottiere Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, at that time employed by the king of Naples. Precisely for this reason, we cannot exclude the possibility that Martino may have spent time in Naples, leaving behind a record of his work: an anonymous cookbook, written during those years in Naples and traditionally labeled *Cuoco napoletano* (Neapolitan cook) by scholars.²³ It is highly similar to Martino’s cookbook. According to some, it is in Naples that Martino’s²⁴

*A canton of present-day Switzerland.—Trans.

professional formation would have matured, which would explain the frequent “southern” aspects of his cooking, particularly the Catalan influence (which others explain as merely the “culinary cosmopolitanism” of the papal court²⁵). In any case, Maestro Martino’s *Libro*, written in Rome in 1464–65 and then revised in successive versions, which fortunately have survived in manuscript, has a profoundly intercity and interregional tone, which contributed decisively to the definition of an “Italian” mode of cooking.

Martino was nonetheless quickly forgotten, at least as an author. Not so his cookbook, which continued to circulate and to enjoy extraordinary success, though attributed to others. A case of true plagiarism was that of Giovanni Rosselli, “the Frenchman” (identified by some as an authentic figure, by others as nothing more than an editorial phantom²⁶), who presented Martino’s text under the title *Opera nova chiamata Epulario* (New work titled Epulario) and achieved an amazing success. Another case was that of the so-called Maestro Giovanni, who in 1530 published his *Opera degnissima*, copied in its entirety from Martino.

But far more important was the European success Martino enjoyed, indirectly, thanks to his friend Platina’s treatise “on guiltless pleasures and good health” (*De honesta voluptate et valetudine*), both in the original Latin and in the translations into Italian, French, and German. On a strictly gastronomic level, the derivation from Martino is direct and explicit: “What cook,” wrote Platina, “can be compared with my Martino, from whom I have learned most of the things I am going to write about.”²⁷ Platina’s work, to be honest, has another cast, given that its recipes fall into a broader cultural and scientific context, stressing the role each ingredient plays in the culinary “system” from a dietary and convivial viewpoint. The pair of Martino and Platina set the tone of Italian cooking at the end of the Middle Ages, contributing decisively to making it an incontestable reference point of European culture.

Martino’s importance in the history of Italian cooking lies not just in the contents of his book but also in the “rhetoric” with which the recipes are conceived and presented. With him begins a new style, marked by a search for clarity. The procedure is recounted in all its phases, taking nothing for granted and exhibiting a didactic sensibility that was lacking in earlier gastronomic literature. Until Maestro Martino, Italian cookbooks were rather approximative, the recipes looking more like notes for someone who already knows how to cook; the amounts are always

missing, and the cooking times are never specified. The contents are not organized continuously, and the order of recipes does not follow defined criteria. Martino knows this tradition very well, so well that he includes in his text various recipes already present in previous manuscripts (those of the “southern family,” as well as those of the “Tuscan family”).²⁸ Martino’s intention, however, is to innovate: among his recipes, three out of four are new. Moreover, he reelaborates, rewrites, lengthens, and abbreviates, all with the purpose of making the explanation clearer. He organizes the material in homogeneous chapters that correspond to a classification by products (meat, eggs, fish) or by dishes (soups, sauces, tortes, fritters; he presents, for the first time, pasta dishes as a “gender” in itself). He introduces new terms, like *polpetta* (meatballs) and *frittelle* (fritters), destined for long life in the gastronomic lexicon of Italy. He introduces products formerly ignored, such as eggplant. In this way, Martino places himself at a watershed: on one side, he marks the fulfillment of medieval tradition, and on the other, he founds modern tradition.

Platina is fully aware of this and declares the superiority of “his” Martino compared with the cooks of antiquity, such as Apicius and all the others: “There is no reason,” he writes, “for us to place the tastes of our ancestors above those of today, for if they surpassed us in most fields, when it comes to taste we are unsurpassable.”²⁹