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THE FRUIT, HERBS & VEGETABLES OF ITALY (1614)

BY GIACOMO CASTELVETRO; TRANSLATED AND INTRODUCED BY GILLIAN RILEY (TOTNES: PROSPECT BOOKS, 2012).

Reviewed by Zachary Nowak, The Umbra Institute

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In 1614, Giacomo Castelvetro, native of Modena but for years in England in self-imposed exile, had a French scribe copy out three versions of his essay “*Brieve racconto di tutte le radici, di tutte le erbe et di tutti i frutti, che crudi o cotti in Italia si mangiano*” (A brief account of all the roots, of all the greens and of all the fruits, that raw or cooked one eats in Italy). This charming early modern account of Italian cuisine was half exhortation to the English to eat their veggies, and half an attempt at getting Castelvetro, then an older man, a pension from the Countess of Bedford so he could live out his years without having to teach Italian to European nobility. Both attempts were failures and Castelvetro’s manuscripts languished for centuries, known only to scholars until Gillian Riley’s translation in 1989. This volume is an updated edition and has much to commend it.

In addition to a short foreword by the late cookery writing great Jane Grigson, there is a long and very thorough introduction by Gillian Riley, also the text’s translator. Riley describes Castelvetro’s youth: after conversion to Protestantism, the young man led a peripatetic life with his uncle, also a convert. It was during these voyages that Castelvetro learned the art of simple meals simply prepared. We take this formula for granted as “Italian” now, but the cuisine of the upper classes in late-sixteenth-century Europe resembled that of the Middle Ages more than today’s fare. Spices were used in what now are unthinkable quantities, and vegetables were generally looked down upon as peasant food.

This is part of the charm of *The Fruits, Herbs & Vegetables of Italy*. While often mentioned in the same breath as the Italian culinary author Platina, Castelvetro does not share the former’s slavish devotion to citing the ancients and shoe-horning good food into the nutritional theory of the day. Indeed, Castelvetro’s essay has only a few references to food’s effect on one’s humors, and not a single classical citation. He organizes his book in four chapters (one for each of the four seasons) and lists, in rough order of chronological appearance, each of the seasons’ food products. The goal of the text is not to describe what is good for you, but simply what is good. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he describes how commoners prepare the fruits of the fields and gardens without turning up his nose in class-induced disdain.

Some of his entries are surprisingly similar to contemporary Italian cooking. Castelvetro’s indications on how to wash and dress salad properly are unconsciously followed by my Italian friends at every meal: “*Insalata ben salata/poco aceto e ben oliata*,” which Riley ably renders as “Salt the salad quite a lot/then generous oil put in the pot/and vinegar, but just a jot” (p. 58). Other foods remind the reader how much European food culture has changed: the book’s first

entry is for hops, and Castelvetro often lists verjuice (the juice of unripe grapes, a substitute for vinegar) in the recipes that dot the text. The reader should be aware, as Riley points out, that this is not a recipe book. Almost all of Castelvetro's culinary advice for these foods falls into three categories: cook in salted water and garnish, cook in broth and garnish with eggs or cheese, and roast in hot coals. There are variations on these themes, but simplicity of preparation is a virtue for Castelvetro.

The text should be of great interest to food historians and those interested in the transition from the obsession with heavily spiced dishes and artificiality as a goal to a simpler, more "natural" style of cooking popularized in France. This transition is usually dated to the late seventeenth century but Castelvetro seems to anticipate the shift towards dishes that exalt rather than hide natural flavors and tend to use oil rather than vinegar. While still influenced by the humoral system, he demonstrates a remarkably modern empiricism. Talking about how some people think that peaches are as unwholesome as they are delicious, he remarks:

For this reason some steep them in good wine, which is supposed to draw out the harmful qualities, though I think myself that they do this more out of gluttony than because of any real danger. Peaches certainly taste much better with wine, and I notice that nobody ever throws away the wine that they have soaked in, or comes to any harm from drinking it. (p. 86)

He also encourages the planting of lupins, a legume still eaten in Italy, as "a cheap way to enrich poor soil" (p. 66). What Castelvetro does *not* describe, though, is also fascinating. His final manuscript is from 1614, yet very few of the products of the Columbian exchange (the foodstuffs from the Americas introduced to Europe post-1492) appear in the text. While we do find a reference to the "Turkish bean" ("Turkish" at this time often indicated an exotic product, not necessarily one from Turkey), we do not find the tomato, bell or hot peppers, potatoes or maize. We do know that Castelvetro knew this last product, though, because he listed it in another manuscript, a "shopping list" of things to bring back from Italy for friends.

Another virtue of the text is its familiarity: Castelvetro prefigures another Italian cookbook writer, Pellegrino Artusi, in his avuncular style. In addition to instructions on how to select and prepare vegetables and fruits, the author frequently digresses to enliven the entries with personal stories. These include grafting a pear with the king of Denmark, learning to swim with hollowed-out squashes as flotation devices, and explaining to a confused German why Italian noblemen walk pigs on leashes (describing truffle hunting). Castelvetro does not shy away from being opinionated about good food, but he does so without being a prig. After describing a recipe for wild mushrooms cooked with oil, garlic, salt, herbs and verjuice, he announces that "Whoever eats them like this and doesn't lick their fingers does not, in my opinion, know much about true gastronomy" (p. 100). Castelvetro's occasional vitriol about "papists" and the Roman church, though a serious topic for him, amuses the reader as well.

In addition to a revised translation, one which Riley makes sparkle just like Castelvetro's original Italian, this new edition recommends itself with an extensive



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glossary at the end. Those of us unfamiliar with the agresto, grass peas, and sorb-apples are nonetheless able to fully understand—and therefore enjoy—Castelvetro’s treatise. In the age of sometimes mediocre book design, Prospect editor and publisher Tom Jaine has put together a beautiful volume as well, from its Galliard typeface (long the official font of Yale University) to its quality paper and elegant cover. The extensive index makes the book accessible to the browser or researcher. The only thing that a reader might have wished for is the much-mentioned “shopping list” that both Grigson and Riley refer to, perhaps as an appendix. This book is a window into the authentic Italian food of the past, without all the Mediterranean diet-inspired invention of tradition.

EATING THE ENLIGHTENMENT: FOOD AND THE SCIENCES IN PARIS, 1670–1760

BY E. C. SPARY (CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2012).

Reviewed by India Aurora Mandelkern, University of California, Berkeley

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When it comes to food history, 18th century Europe contains a rich reserve of resources that scholars have only begun to tap. The unprecedented influx of exotic comestibles from Asia and the Americas has allowed scholars to measure class, gender, and racial attitudes in the consumption of coffee, chocolate, and sugar. Agricultural innovations produced new crops, food surpluses, and dramatic demographic changes. And last, historians are finally beginning to take seriously the fact that the public sphere Jurgen Habermas described was produce in the course of meals; coffeehouses, cafes, and restaurants were all new features of the Enlightenment. In these new public spaces, historians have argued, new types of social interaction were forged over the conspicuous consumption of food and drink.

We know considerably less, however, about food as a discrete category of formalized knowledge. This is no small oversight given that the classification of knowledge—manifested in things like Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* and Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopedie*—was so exigent to the idea of enlightenment in the first place. Nor have the following two centuries resolved the problem. While concrete boundaries have emerged in the fields of philosophy, history and anthropology, food studies remains in its disciplinary infancy. Nutritional science is only slightly ahead, evidenced by the fact that we continue today to debate the dietary efficacy of calorie counting and whether the doctor *truly* knows best. The unstable status of food as knowledge lies at the heart of Emma Spary’s *Eating the Enlightenment*.

In this ambitious and thought-provoking study, Spary illustrates how the most ordinary and mundane of human activities—eating—animated various discussions about the relationships among man, his stomach and his mind. As centers of knowledge production extended beyond the confines of universities to various public and private spaces, qualifying the types of information that counted as “learning”