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Ovophilia in Renaissance Cuisine

Ken Albala

Sixteenth-century culinary literature ushered in what might be called the first Renaissance of egg cookery. While medieval cookbooks did feature eggs and they formed a significant part of the European diet at every level of society, it was in the sixteenth century that egg recipes truly proliferated. Eggs became binding liaisons in the vast majority of recipes, replacing breadcrumbs as the preferred thickener. Cookbook authors also experimented with novel ways to cook eggs from barely cooked *ova sorbilia*, to poached, fried, baked, roasted, even grilled eggs, not to mention numerous omelets, custards, zabaglione and egg garnishes. Furthermore, egg yolks were worked in some fashion into a surprising majority of Renaissance recipes as a universal flavor enhancer. As one of the most versatile of ingredients, eggs, more than any other food, became a showcase for Renaissance chefs hoping to impress their patrons with culinary innovations. The egg as big as twenty eggs is perhaps the best example of the culinary subtlety, intended to evoke marvel, but there were many more.

This sudden proliferation of eggs in Renaissance recipes may have had something to do with larger demographic and economic factors which ultimately led to a burgeoning trade in eggs supplying local and particularly urban markets. With a sudden spike in population coupled with rampant inflation, the average European household was increasingly pressured to find alternatives to meat which witnessed the sharpest rise in prices. Egg farming, as with dairy products in general, became increasingly profitable. The abundance of fresh eggs at the market in turn may have stimulated cooks in wealthier households to experiment with eggs even though versatility rather than cost would most likely have been the incentive.

The loosening of Lenten restrictions on dairy products, butter and eggs in particular, may have given further impetus to the development of egg cookery. In Catholic countries a range of new possibilities was opened for the so-called lean days, including every Friday. Not only fish and vegetable dishes but a series of omelets, flans and egg-enriched dishes suddenly became viable options. In Protestant countries, the gradual abandonment of these dietary restrictions altogether also made eggs an ideal ingredient for experimentation.

To begin, why were eggs used comparatively infrequently in late medieval cuisine? Apart from the low cost of meat and Lenten restrictions still in force, there also appears to have been an unwillingness to incorporate eggs into elaborate dishes. There was no apparent stigma against eggs, though of course those lower down the social scale would have eaten them regularly. In the dietary literature eggs were usually singled out as one of the most tempered, easily digested and nutritious foods. Among

elite diners there must have been some other impetus for the relative neglect. It may have had something to do with the vogue for sweet and sour sauces redolent of spices. Eggs can get lost in such sauces. The gradual taste preference for smooth, creamy and perfumed flavors more readily lends itself to emulsions based on egg. That is when sharp piquant flavors lost favor to unctuous tastes and textures it may only be natural that eggs found a welcome place in cookery. Another gastronomic factor may have been the ubiquity of ground almonds and almond milk in medieval cuisine, which readily supplied creamy textures when called for, during Lent or outside of it. It may also have been a simple matter that the full range of egg-thickened sauces had not yet made their way into the culinary repertoire of cookbook authors – though this only accounts for sauces.

Whatever the cause, perhaps purely accidental, a survey of medieval recipes reveals that eggs while used are nowhere near the ubiquitous flavor enhancer they would come to be in Renaissance cuisine. Where eggs, or more precisely the yolks, were used most often was as gilding on roasts, color being one of the major preoccupations of medieval chefs. The Middle Ages also had its omelets, but again in nowhere near the proliferation as in later cookbooks. For example in the *Viandier*, among the 170 recipes in the Vatican manuscript there are only four dishes that feature eggs as the main ingredient, in this case as meatless pottages.¹ One is a *civé d'oeufs* which is eggs 'poached' in oil and then served in a broth of fried onions, wine, vinegar and verjuice which is then poured over the previous recipe for toast sops and mustard. A German *brouet* variation includes almond milk and spices, and a third variation is made bright green with parsley and sage and flavored with cheese.² Eggs are nowhere else featured as the main ingredient in the *Viandier*. This does not necessarily mean that they were not eaten. As with many early cookbooks, foods that were considered simple and commonplace required no recipes. It may be that like vegetables, they were prepared simply and so are largely absent from complex cookbooks. Nonetheless, this is itself revealing. No one was particularly excited about recording egg recipes, or indeed experimenting with them in complex cookery. This would not be the case in Renaissance cookbooks.

Furthermore, only one of the *Viandier's* sauces uses egg yolks, mixed with milk and ginger – called a *Jance de lait de vache*.³ Some of the other *Viandier* manuscripts contain an egg recipe here and there – a dish containing grated bread, bouillon and cheese with eggs strained in, or an herb and cheese pie held together with eggs, a flan with cream, eggs and sliced eels.⁴ But in general eggs were not a major ingredient in any versions of this cookbook.

The *Ménagier de Paris* included a few more dishes in a section devoted to eggs, perhaps fitting for an urban professional household which would have depended more heavily on eggs, and as an advice book for a young bride it also makes sense that such basic procedures as egg cookery are covered. There is an omelet or *arboulastre* made of a wild variety of fresh greens and ginger. Also included are a handful of simpler

recipes such as *oeufs perdus*, strangely eggs simply broken open and poured directly onto hot embers, wiped off and eaten. Another dish of the same name is merely yolks sweetened and fried and cut up into lozenge shapes. Decidedly inventive are yolks fried in melted sugar, and an odd *oeufs heaumés* (helmet eggs) which is an egg yolk cooked in half the shell set on a tile in the fire. We also find a recipe for eggs poached in oil in a sauce of fried onion, vinegar and water, similar the *Viandier*'s. Elsewhere the author also describes how to temper eggs with hot milk to use as a thickener.⁵ All these are an indication that in more modest households eggs were a more important part of the diet, but this does not begin to approach the range and complexity of egg recipes in later centuries.

The same is true of English medieval cookbooks. The *Curye on Inglysch* offers a few simple egg recipes: *eyren in bruet* which is eggs poached in water with pepper, saffron, milk and cheese.⁶ The *Forme of Cury* has a similar recipe which includes butter and verjuice. Both manuscripts also contain a *pochee* which is poached eggs in a thickened egg and milk sauce, an ancestor perhaps of hollandaise without the butter.⁷ The recipe also appears to be directly related to the aforementioned broths in the *Viandier*, as is an *erbolat*, very similar to the omelet of greens.⁸ These are the only three recipes featuring eggs as the main ingredient out of 205 in the *Forme of Cury*. Eggs are used occasionally in fritter batters, in stuffings or as thickeners, for example *mortreus* is boiled and chopped chicken and pork moistened with broth and egg yolks. Similarly the *charlet*, *cawdel* and a few other recipes are thickened with eggs. But on the whole, eggs are absent from the majority of recipes.

The two fifteenth-century Harleian manuscripts are similar, with a recipe for poached eggs⁹ and a fascinating counterfeit egg (*eyroun in Lenten*) made with strained almond milk solids which are somehow put back into an empty shell and roasted.¹⁰ As in the earlier cookery texts eggs are used in a handful of places, but there is no interest in them *per se*.

The fourteenth century cookbook whose author is known as Anonimo Veneziano features a stuffed egg recipe very much like a modern devilled egg though sweet, flavored with herbs and served hot. But that is the sole egg recipe out of 135.¹¹ As in the French and English cookbooks, they are only found in tarts or as a sauce thickener. The Catalan *Libre de Sent Soví* is much more interested in eggs, offering recipes for fried eggs with bacon, another with verjuice, in sauce (which is actually poached and placed on sops, very similar to the *Viandier*'s) as well as an *alidem ha hous* which denotes a sour sauce thickened with eggs, apparently of Arabic origin.¹² But once again, this is merely six recipes out of a total of 220.

As we cross the threshold into the early modern era, suddenly egg recipes proliferate. Signs of this change are apparent even in the cookbook of Martino of Como, written in the latter fifteenth century and published in Platina's *De honesta voluptate* of 1470. There are still some familiar medieval treatments such as the yellow broth with bread eggs and cheese and the herb omelet – here naturally called a *frittata*, but

also an entire chapter devoted to eggs that shows some remarkable innovations.¹³ There are fried eggs, *ove sperdute* which are poached and topped with sugar, rosewater and spices – these can also be poached in milk or wine. There are stuffed eggs with a filling that contains raisins, aged cheese, herbs and spices served with a sauce of egg yolks and verjuice or *sapa* with ginger, cloves and cinnamon. Eggs on the grill is an entirely novel recipe. It involves first frying a thin *frittata* first folded into a square. This is then placed on the grill and fresh eggs are broken on top of it and cooked and the whole sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. Equally new is eggs threaded onto a hot spit and roasted. Eggs are also cooked in little *patelletes*, which are probably like ramekins. They are roasted in hot ashes, soft-boiled in their shells, fried sunny-side up, which are called Florentine style, and hard-cooked on hot coals. One of his strangest inventions is frying the egg and then removing the yolk, mixing it with grated cheese, mint, parsley and raisins and more egg yolks. This mixture is then replaced in the hole, refried and topped with orange juice and ginger. Presumably it looks like a regular fried egg but with a surprise in the center. His last invention in this chapter wraps eggs in pasta dough like ravioli. The original form of this pasta was indeed turnip-shaped, *raffoli* as Martino calls it, and one can easily imagine a thin sheet of dough in the palm of the hand into which an egg is dropped and then sealed at the top like a purse. These can then be boiled or fried, though he prefers the latter. This sounds like a trick one might find in a trendy modern restaurant; breaking into each morsel lets it exude its own sauce. In any case, Martino is clearly very interested in creating new egg dishes.

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He also incorporates eggs into a large percentage of other recipes. They are usually offered as an option: 'If you wish to make your broth thick, add two or three egg yolks'¹⁴ or, in the recipe for pie in a pot, 'if you like, add one or two beaten egg yolks.'¹⁵ What this suggests is that Martino is taking recognizable recipes and adding eggs where they might not ordinarily be expected. Eggs go into stuffings and tarts, thicken sauces, bind sausage contents, hold dumplings together and even enrich a rice dish, though Martino comments that many won't like eggs in their rice, so leave it up to the taste of your patron.¹⁶ Clearly he is looking for ways to incorporate eggs, even contrary to common taste preference. It is safe to say that practically anywhere Martino can fit them in, he calls for eggs. Interestingly, this text was written when the Lenten and lean days' prohibition was still in effect. At one point in a recipe for an eel tart he comments that if made at times when you can eat eggs, temper two eggs with verjuice and add to the other ingredients and it will be really good, and certainly not worse.¹⁷ There can be no doubt that Martino was crazy about eggs. For Lent he even has an imitation egg dish far more detailed and precise than that found in the Harleian manuscript. It is made of almond milk, rice, starch and sugar fitted into molds surrounding a saffron-colored yolk, or in empty shells.¹⁸

In the sixteenth century the craze for eggs only intensified. In the 1540s there appeared a series of cookbooks in France, England and Italy all of which exhibit this

new ovophilia. The *Livre fort excellent de Cuyisine* offers a series of egg recipes, poached in butter, cooked in water but also a few fascinating presentation pieces. Eggs of many colors, although nothing so strange today, must have been startling at the time. They are boiled in water colored red with *racine de Garence* (which is *Rubia tinctoria*, a dyestuff) or with onion peels to make them yellow, or gold leaf to make them violet, though exactly how that works is unclear. Sounding even stranger is eggs cooked without fire. Here the eggs are nestled in a basket of lime (calcium carbonate) and the whole thing is dipped in water, which apparently cooks the eggs.¹⁹

The nearly contemporary *Proper newe Book of Cokerye*, was probably written around 1557–8 when the printers were active, also still distinguishes between meat and non-meat days, which makes sense during the reign of Mary. It does, however, include a salad with hard-boiled eggs for fish-days, so clearly that prohibition had been rescinded.²⁰ More inventive is the so-called ‘dyshe full of Snow’ which appears in most cookbooks of these decades. The author has muddled the directions a little, but essentially it is a whipped egg white and whipped cream concoction passed through a colander onto an apple stuck with rosemary branches which makes a little winter scene. The author also incorporates eggs into custards, various fritters, including *vau-tes* which are a thin omelet of veal kidneys, raisins and spices.²¹ Even the tarts contain eggs, not only in the pastry, but the filling as well, whether made of beans, gooseberries, medlars, borage flowers and even strawberries are bound with egg yolks and bread crumbs. Like Martino, the author seems to be searching for ways to incorporate eggs: yolks go into apple sauce. *Egges in moneshyne* is perhaps the best-recognized dish in this cookbook, though the dish changes over time. Here it is merely whole egg yolks poached in melted sugar and rosewater – a conceit intended to resemble a bright moon in a limpid sky.²²

In the contemporary Italian cookbook of Christoforo Messisbugo eggs are regularly featured in banquet menus both for flesh and fish days, interestingly served in the final course (before confections) with fruits, olives and pastries, served simply or sometimes just the yolks served *alla francese* (poached gently in butter) and sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon. In fact, there is scarcely a menu in which eggs are not featured on their own simply as ‘fresh eggs’ or ‘eggs in various ways.’ The recipes too are absolutely chock full of eggs and butter. Sweetened breads and pastries as well as savory dishes usually include eggs or yolks. To give an impression of the tastes and textures most appreciated in the Ferrarese court where Messisbugo worked, the *Pizze Sfogliate* is exemplary. It is made of the interior of bread soaked in water with flour, egg yolks, butter, rosewater and sugar. This dough is rolled into minutely thin sheets, basted with butter, rolled and sliced and then finally fried in butter and sprinkled with sugar.²³ One is almost hard pressed to find a recipe in this book that does not contain eggs in some fashion. They are worked into tarts both savory and sweet, pasta dough, fritters including an early *pâte choux*,²⁴ as well as fruit, vegetable and meat pies. Interestingly there are variant versions of most pastries made without butter or

eggs, so it seems that at least during Lent restrictions were either still in force in Italy or these were variations offered for the sake of variety or austerity. A later section of recipes described as 'da magro' also excludes eggs.

Messisbugo also incorporates egg yolks into most of his soups and thicker *minestre* of rice, meat or vegetables as well as fricassees. A 'Hungarian' egg soup includes 40 eggs with verjuice, butter and sugar lightly cooked in a bain marie until thickened.²⁵ Eggs are similarly incorporated into sauces and there is also a *salsa di Torli d'uova* made with herbs, cooked egg yolks and vinegar.²⁶ Eggs are also served on their own, stuffed with raisins, pine nuts, herbs and spices²⁷ or in little rolled morsels of scrambled egg with spices, sugar and orange juice. Eggs are featured in *frittatas* served simply or stuffed with various ingredients such as cheese, onions, fennel, prosciutto and even caviar. Eggs are served simply fried, on toast with or without cheese. In what appears to be a new recipe called *fritte a Scartozzo*, a thin layer of egg is fried, covered with grated cheese, pepper and a sprig of rosemary then folded over and served three to a plate, sprinkled with sugar.²⁸ Without belaboring the point, eggs are one of the most frequently used ingredients and find their way into the most elegant of banquet menus in sixteenth-century Italy.

One last cookbook should amply illustrate this sixteenth-century obsession with eggs, Bartolomeo Scappi's magisterial *Opera* printed in 1570. It may be the sheer size of the book that accounts for the wealth of egg recipes, but the willingness to include them in recipes and on their own is eminently characteristic of Renaissance gastronomy. Scappi has literally dozens of egg recipes. The variety of omelets, for example, includes one with ham, onions and cheese. Another is a made of stacked layers with sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg and fresh cheese, precooked garlic cloves and raisins splashed with orange juice. *Frittatas* are filled with veal or kid spleen, mixed with pork blood and spices, or with cured pork jowl, skin and cheese. Obviously lacking any aversion to organ meats, Scappi can be inventive and even slightly perverse – at least from our vantage point.²⁹

Scappi also makes a clear distinction among his recipes which are merely for 'lean' days in which eggs and butter were allowed and which are for fasting days during Lent when oil replaces butter, almond milk stands in for dairy and eggs are also prohibited. Nonetheless the range of egg dishes suitable outside of Lent and for other lean days is impressive. There are *uova da bere* or what is called in the Latin writers *ova sorbilis* – drinkable eggs. These must be fresh, are pierced with a pin and then boiled for the length of a *credo* (about 30 seconds). It is cooked just until the egg will spin, or until it's too hot to hold in your hand. The top is broken off, it is sprinkled with salt and sugar, and then presumably drunk directly from the shell.³⁰

Scappi also includes precise directions for every possible way to cook an egg, indicating that this is intended to be a complete guide to cooking from the basics to the most complex dishes imaginable.³¹ There are details on how to poach an egg without breaking it that could stand in any modern cookbook. Another explains

French eggs, braised in butter in little earthenware ramekins, eggs fried in clarified butter – properly so the whites stay light and don't stick to the pan. There are also meticulously rolled over omelets (rather than *frittatas*) and fried eggs in a special pan with indentations (*padella fatta ad occhi di bove*) which is illustrated in the section on equipment. Scappi also suggests a technique I have seen nowhere else: soft-boiled eggs which are then floured and fried and covered in garlic sauce. Eggs are also stuffed in various ways, one with a hot almond and verjuice sauce. Rolled omelets are colored green with herb juice, or stuffed with marzipan, cut up, coated with an egg wash, battered and fried, called *cannoncini*. There are *frittate doppie* made with ten stacked flat omelets filled with cheese, herbs and raisins cooked in wine, as well as *frittatas*, made specifically with eggs that are not fresh, which become tough in cooking. These are filled with mint, marjoram, crushed *mostaccioli* cookies, pine nuts and truffles. Clearly eggs had been elevated among the most exquisite of dishes.

Another egg novelty is the *frittata* or *torta in acqua*: ten fresh eggs are beaten with some water and then poured into boiling in salted water, scooped out with a perforated spoon and drained. These too can be made green with spinach juice or fine herbs. Equally interesting is eggs cooked on a metal baker's peel with beeswax rather than butter or oil, and heated only from above (presumably in the oven) or they can be made on top of hot coals, or directly on the hot coals for picky people. There are also eggs called *barbagliate* which are slowly broken up and stirred over a gentle heat, a kind of soft scrambled eggs cooked with verjuice, orange juice, and sugar and rosewater at the end. Eggs are also made into thick soups as well as an herb-laden *vivarole* not unlike *straciatella* or egg-drop soup in which the eggs, bread and cheese are stirred into the boiling soup and cook in strands. Needless to say Scappi and Renaissance elite cooks in general experimented wildly with eggs in every possible guise, and this brief list only includes those recipes in which eggs are the major ingredient.

But even this is not the whole repertoire. In the book on dishes for the infirm another set of egg dishes appears. Again, soft-boiled or roasted eggs, poached in water, or in goat's milk or sweet white wine, all for some inexplicable reason considered appropriate for the sick, perhaps maybe as comfort food. How else can one explain eggs fried in capon or goose fat?³² In any case, novel ways of cooking eggs and incorporating them into a wide variety of recipes was one of the hallmarks of Renaissance cookery.

Eggs would remain a major feature in elite cookbooks well into the seventeenth century, culminating in greater presentation pieces such as the 'great compound egg as big as twenty eggs' found in Robert May.³³ May incidentally offers no less than 64 egg recipes in their own chapter. Renaissance cuisine might also be said to have laid the foundations for the next great period of egg cookery, in French *haute cuisine*, when the soufflé, cakes and various egg-based sauces such as mayonnaise, hollandaise and béarnaise were invented. How eggs were demoted in modern cookery to breakfast food, and how the range of egg dishes narrowed in subsequent centuries remains a

question that deserves further research, but it may be related to the overwhelming emphasis on and lower price of meat in the modern era, leaving eggs as a basic and far more humble ingredient.

Notes

1. Terence Scully, ed., *The Viandier of Taillevent* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1988), p. 84.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
5. Jérôme Pichon, ed., *Le Ménagier De Paris, Traité De Morale Et D'économie Domestique Composé Vers 1393, Par Un Bourgeois Parisien* (Paris: La Société Des Bibliophiles François. Tome Second, 1846), pp. 206–10.
6. Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, eds., *Curie on Inghysch* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 66.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
9. Thomas Austin, ed., *Two Fifteenth Century Cookery-Books* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 24.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
11. Ludovico Frati, ed., *Libro di cucina del Secolo XIV* (Bologna: arnaldo Forni, 1986), p. 26.
12. Rudolf Grewe, *Libre de Sent Soví* (Barcelona: Editorial Barcino, 1979), pp. 184–187.
13. Maestro Martino, *Libro de arte coquinaria*, ed. Luigi Ballerini e Jeremy Parzen (Milano: guido Tommasi Editore, 2003), pp. 74–78. This book has also been translated into English as *The Art of Cooking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Page numbers refer to the Italian edition.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
19. *Livre fort excellent de Cuisine* (2nd ed. Lyon: Olivier Arnoullet, 1555), fol. xxxixv.
20. *A Proper newe Book of Cokerye* (London: John Kynge and Thomas Marche, n.d.; c. 1557–8) Sometimes cited as c. 1545. Modern edition edited by Anne Ahmed: (Cambridge: Corpus Christi College, 2002), p. 36. This contains a useful facsimile of the original plus the editor's sometimes questionable transcription/interpretation. Another transcription was edited by Jane Hugget (Bristol: Stuart Press, 1995).
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 54–6.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
23. Cristoforo di Messisbugo, *Banchetti* (Ferrara: Giovanni di Bughat and Antonio Hucher, 1549). Facsimile of Second Edition: *Libro Novo nel Qual S'insegna A' far d'Ogni Sorte di Vivianda* (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni Editore, 2001), p. 43v.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 81v.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 87v.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 110–112.

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29. Bartolomeo Scappi, *Opera* (Venice: Domenico Tramezzino, 1570). Facsimile: (Bologna, Arnaldo Forni, 2002), pp. 83–86.
30. Ibid., p. 158v.
31. Ibid., pp. 158v–162v.
32. Ibid., p. 422v.
33. Robert May, *The Accomplisht Cook*, facsimile of 1685 edition (Totnes, Devon: Prospect Books, 2000), p. 433.