Fall 9-1-2005

Martino of Como and Stefania Barzini. The Art of Cooking: The First Modern Cookery Book

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Martino of Como and Stefania Barzini. *The Art of Cooking: The First Modern Cookery Book*.

Ed. Luigi Ballerini. Trans. Jeremy Parzen. California Studies in Food and Culture 14. With modern adaptations by Stefania Barzini. Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 2004. vi + 208 pp. index. illus. bibl. $29.95. ISBN: 0–520–23271–2.

As the first printed cookbook, albeit embedded in Platina's *De Honesta voluptate*, translated from Italian to Latin and thence into vernacular languages and even Italian again, Martino's *Libro de arte coquinaria* has waited over five centuries for a good English translation. This book is actually a translation of an Italian paperback edition that appeared in 2001 from publisher Guido Tommasi, although this does not seem to be acknowledged.

The introduction, which for some reason we are invited to skip, pieces together the threadbare facts of Martino's life while dismissing the misguided efforts of other scholars. Little is said about fifteenth-century cookery or why this text is so important. Nor is the claim that this is the first modern cookbook sustained. It may be modern in being printed, but hardly so in the ingredients, techniques, or presentation. Nor can Martino be considered the first celebrity chef, particularly since no one knew who he was until his rediscovery by Vehling in the twentieth century. These were presumably just marketing choices. Ballerini does, however,

cling to some notions that have been long ago abandoned by food scholars: that Catherine de Medici introduced Italian cooking to France and that spices became scarce with Ottoman expansion. The Venetians remained major players in the Mediterranean spice trade through the sixteenth century even after the Portuguese made direct contact with the East. In any case spices remain prominent in this cookbook and those that follow for the next two centuries.

The text itself, using both the Library of Congress and Vatican manuscripts as well as "extravagant" recipes from the Riva del Garda and Morgan Library manuscripts, is mostly reliably translated, but cookbooks are notoriously tricky. One must trust the author's words and not force them to say what we think they should. For example, in a recipe for Manfrigo in Menestre (37, Italian ed.) here translated as Fregola Pottage (72) the original directs that grated bread be surrounded by a ring of flour, and four or five eggs are mixed in and beaten until the mixture resembles candied aniseeds in size. The flour, periodically tossed in, keeps them separate. Then we are told "pogni ogni cosa sopra la stamegnia et caccia fore la farina." Clearly everything is placed in a sieve and shaken so the excess flour falls through and only the pasta remains on top. The translation here, however, instructs "pass it all through a stamine, remove the flour." This would clearly ruin the pasta, and why here and throughout the text the archaic obscure *stamine* is used rather than *sieve* is unclear.

There are other examples: a blancmanger over capon recipe instructs to "top generously with pieces of apple" (62) when the original says "paricchi grani de poma" meaning pomegranate seeds. Other little mistakes can be found: *starne* is translated as "Greek partridge" rather than "Grey Partridge" (50); canella and cinnamon are not the same thing, which is why Martino offered one as an alternative for the other (51); Martino could not have used the famous *zucca marina di Chioggia* or any other kind of "squash" because all these Cucurbits come from America (68). He would have been using Lagenaria. Lard as known by American readers is not the same as Italian *lardo*. Meat is pounded thin for roulades with the "costa del coltello," or flat side of the knife blade, not the "knife handle" (55). A spiny lobster is closed up with a cotton wad "perché non esca fore la bontà sua" meaning the juices, not "so that its good meat is not lost when you cook it" (106). In these cases the expert Martino's own words should have been trusted.

Other mistakes may have occurred in production — Messisbugo is called a "fourteenth-century Italian cook" (90). Lines are missing from a few recipes (sardines, 107, and deer pie, 52) or whole recipes accidentally dropped (128, recipes 46 and 47 in the Morgan Library manuscript).

Quibbling and picking aside, the majority of these recipes are reliably translated and will work. Barring finding one of the early English translations that appeared as *Epulario* under the name Rosselli (which were thrice-removed from the original, if not more) this is the best text available for those interested in what is, undoubtedly, the most important of late medieval cookbooks.

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