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Book review: *The Italian Baroque Table: Cooking and Entertaining from the Golden Age of Naples*. Tommaso Astarita. *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 459. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2014. xii + 298 pp. \$65.

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The Italian Baroque Table: Cooking and Entertaining from the Golden Age of Naples. Tommaso Astarita.

Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 459. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2014. xii + 298 pp. \$65.

Among the classics of Italian gastronomy is a monumentally grand and comprehensive tome called *Lo Scalco alla Moderna* written by the court banquet manager Antonio Latini and published in Naples in two parts (1692 and 1694). The book deserves to be better known, not merely because it contains the first recipes for tomatoes anywhere in print (essentially a Mexican salsa), but because it represents the last great iteration of a tradition that stretches back about six centuries, encompassing the culinary culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, but coming to an end when classical French haute cuisine entirely reoriented European palates and dining habits. A direct line of descent can be drawn from Taillevent and the *Forme of Cury*, through Martino and Scappi, directly to Latini. That is, the colored, perfumed, spiced, sugar-laden, almond-inflected recipes that dominated elite European tables found their final expression in this definitively Baroque of cookbooks. The title under review here is a book about that book.

For readers who can read Italian, Latini is available online via Google Books and elsewhere, and in an excellent if expensive facsimile edition from Polistampa of 2004. Latini's prose is pompous and adorned with such an excess of ornament that one might be tempted to dismiss it as insufferable frippery, but the recipes are solid and the cooking directions are clear, and of those I have cooked, quite delicious. It is an aesthetic much aligned with the music of Baroque Naples—think of Alessandro Scarlatti—as well as with the architecture and painting—perhaps akin to someone like Luca Giordano. There are sunbursts, piles of contorted figures crammed into the space, and dramatic contrasts of light and shadow. It works in small doses for twenty-first-century sensibilities.

For that reason it was a good idea to compose this book about Latini, which includes long sections translated directly from the original into English, but not so much as to become nauseating with sweetness. The form of this book is unusual in that short topical essays are punctuated by passages from Latini, which works for modern readers and definitely as a general introduction for scholars not specializing in food. Astarita does an excellent job of setting the book in historical context, discussing the banquetting style of the era, contemporary ideas about ingredients and flavor preferences, and other preoccupations arising from medicine and religion (including fasting regulations). Astarita has read widely in the food history of the early modern period, and there is

actually very little in print that focuses on late seventeenth-century Italy since most surveys move directly onto La Varenne and the supposed revolution in taste that he initiated. Latini is one of the last works uninfluenced by those changes.

In the end, readers will definitely want a sense of what this food tasted like. The recipes are complex, the ingredients difficult to assemble and even harder to cook. And then there's the obstacle of truly appreciating this food with our modern taste buds. There is an effective strategy, equally useful for tackling Baroque poetry. In a class I once took on *Paradise Lost* students were complaining about the complexity and obscurity of Milton's references. They were piled on in such incongruous profusion, it seemed, that it would take a lifetime to track them down and understand why they were there. Latini's recipes are much the same: some veal, garnished with cockscombs and testicles, ducks, salami, ham, a riot of herbs, sweetbreads, olives, sausages, fennel, truffles, oysters, pistachios, roasted hare's thighs, spices, etc. You could not possibly take in and discern all the flavors in such a dish (an *oglia podrita*). So, our Milton professor suggested, don't worry about the details yet, just let it all wash over you. You can absorb the overall flavor without getting bogged down in detail. Then return to it later, when you can better pick out the individual notes, the harmonies and dissonances, the swirling array of obscure references.

My hope is that one day scholars will study the food of periods such as this in the same way that we discuss art, music, and philosophy of the past. Astarita's book succeeds in beginning that process for the cuisine of Baroque Naples.

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