INTRODUCTION

MAESTRO MARTINO
THE CARNEADES OF COOKS

Luigi Ballerini

Dear Reader: This is a cookbook—a historical cookery book. If you do not care to read about the world from which it grew (and it would be perfectly understandable if you didn’t), skip the present introduction altogether. No need to feel guilty about it. Read it only if you are the type that does not mind a little suffering. I promise that, at the end, you will hasten to search for a great chef, either in the outside world or within yourself, to obtain from either of them (or from both) the culinary reward you undoubtedly deserve.

For a good number of years, a few centuries in fact, the only known mention of Maestro Martino was to be found in the writings of the fifteenth-century Italian humanist Bartolomeo Sacchi, who was acquainted with him personally.

This means that the name of an unknown person was for a while on the lips and twice, at least, in the pen of a “reporter” who, in our day and age, is just as unknown as his “reportee.”

The muse of history contributed some humor of its own. So enchanted was Sacchi (who in his own time was actually famous enough to need no introduction) with Martino’s gastronomic and rhetorical virtues that he did not hesitate to compare him to Carneades (213–129 B.C.E.), whom Sacchi’s contemporaries would have immediately recognized as the illustrious philosopher who headed the New Platonic Academy in Athens, and whose subtle eloquence and argumentative dexterity, appreciated and praised during that rebirth of classical culture we know as the Renaissance, would eventually fall into the same oblivion that now surrounds the cook no less than the scholar.

There is more: ever since the hypertrophic question “Carneades, who was he now?” found its way into the pages of Alessandro Manzoni’s I promessi sposi (The Betrothed; first published in 1827), only to be repeated, generation after generation, by legions of high school kids, Italians have adopted the name Carneades as the quintessential moniker of obscurity.

Thus, to make sure that fame would not treat Martino unfairly, Bartolomeo Sacchi bestowed upon him the following encomium: “What a cook, O immortal gods, you bestowed in my friend Martino of Como, from whom I have received, in great part, the things of which I am writing. You would say he was another Carneades if you were to hear him eloquently speaking ext tempore about the matters described above.”

Luckily, by the time the events in this story began to unfold, the printing press had become a permanent feature of European cultural life, with the result that Sacchi’s praise of Martino would be repeated a fair number of times, in the 1474 as well as in the numerous subsequent
editions of his treatise *De honesta voluptate et valetudine* (On Right Pleasure and Good Health). But Sacchi’s treatise paid homage to Martino in a way that went beyond the exigency of a compliment, eventually yielding results that we are only beginning to appreciate more than five centuries later. By “lifting” the cook’s recipes and translating them into Latin, Sacchi ensured that the highly original approach of Maestro Martino’s *De arte coquinaria* (The Art of Cooking) would not remain confined to a few obscure manuscripts penned in the vernacular, but on the contrary would be disseminated throughout Renaissance Europe in the first cookbook deemed worthy of mechanical reproduction.3

To fully appreciate the novelty and impact of Martino’s gastronomy, we must situate him in time and place, studying the changes in culinary practice that his example helped to usher in. Given the paucity of historical information available about Martino himself, our study must be necessarily oblique. We begin with the prologue-master, Sacchi, about whom much was known though little is now remembered, and proceed from there to the leading man, about whom we now know a little more than we did a few decades ago, although certainly not enough to satisfy our appetite. Along the way, we will season the plot with accounts of supporting actors and extras (Renaissance popes and cardinals, for the most part, but even a twentieth-century American gentleman), and with a register of motives that will surely pique the interest of those who love good food and the history and art of gastronomy.

Bartolomeo Sacchi is much more recognizable by his pseudonym, Platina (PLAH-tee-nah), a Latinization of Piadena, the name of the small township in which he was born in 1421, poised between Cremona and Mantua in the heart of the fertile, humid Padanian plains. We can only imagine that he couldn’t wait to leave, as is the case for many even today. Remembering his birthplace whenever he appended his name at the bottom of an epistle or some official document must have seemed to him jingoistic enough.

Judging from his future career as a humanist, it is fair to surmise that he would have preferred to have been born in Greece, or at least to have perfected his competence in the language of literature, philosophy, and art by conversing with his peers in an appropriate academic garden or, lacking such a garden, under the roof of a well-constructed stoa.

But Platina had been born into a poor family that looked upon such Renaissance dreams as the ravings of a lunatic, and so he was forced to become a soldier of fortune. If Platina was present, as is highly probable, at the legendary Battle of Anghiari in 1440, in which Florence defeated Milan, he probably heard mention of Ludovico Trevisan—it is unlikely that he actually saw him on the battlefield. Trevisan, on orders from the Holy Church, had brought four thousand men to the site of the conflict, and some years later would be served by Maestro Martino in Rome.4

Quickly tiring, we presume, of both the art of war and the soldier’s pay that came with it, Platina sought and obtained the protection of the Gonzaga family, the princely house that ruled Mantua. This enabled him to study with the famed humanist and preceptor Omnibonus Leonicensus, called by his friends Ognibene da Lonigo. When the latter, in turn, grew tired of instructing the Gonzagas’ children, Platina was handpicked by him as his successor.
From the Mantua of the Gonzagas, Platina made his way to the Florence of the Medicis, which by then could claim to have become a New Athens, possibly the greatest center of that "renewal of learning" by which Italy has managed to capture and exploit the cultural attention of the modern and contemporary world. There he studied with Byzantine humanist John Argyropoulos (1415–87), who had arrived in Florence in 1456 after fleeing Constantinople (which fell to the Ottomans in 1453) and could boast of having as students the most illustrious scholars and poets of the time, such as Marsilio Ficino, Poggio Bracciolini, Cristoforo Landino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Politian.

Highly cultured and restless, Platina left Florence for Rome in 1461, following his student Francesco Gonzaga, who had been made cardinal—at the tender age of eighteen—by the "humanist pope" Pius II, Enea Silvio Piccolomini. And in Rome he would remain, through good times and bad, until he died in 1481 from the plague and was buried in the glorious basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, with funeral rites attended by a congregation of Roman literati.

In the Eternal City, Platina sought fortune as obstinately as misfortune sought him, as we shall see.

After more than a hundred years of neglect on the part of her bishop and God-appointed master, the return of Pope Martin V, which concluded the so-called Avignon Exile or Babylonian Captivity (1309–1417), as well as the Great Schism (1378–1417), had engendered an explosion of creative activity that quickly dissipated the anxiety generated by the penurious squalor into which Rome had been precipitated. Reflecting on those years, Platina himself commented that "Rome no longer looked like a city.... There was not even a trace of an urban reality." With the vigor and zeal allowed only to those who derive their power directly from God, Martin V cleaned the streets, restored the great landmarks, demolished dangerous illegal constructions, and had criminals decapitated. In just a few years, his improvements to the city were so great that, in the *Diarium urbis Romae* (Diary of the City of Rome), Stefano Infessura would recount how Paolo di Benedetto di Cola allowed himself to be won over with enthusiasm for the renewed urban life, and wrote that a man could travel undisturbed for miles and miles, night and day, throughout the Roman countryside, with his money in the palm of his hand.

Once again you could breathe in Rome, both physically and metaphorically: the city had transformed itself from mephitic village to capital of the High Renaissance. Fledgling patronage attracted some of the greatest humanists to Rome, like Lorenzo Valla and Leonardo Bruni. These and others came to work in the papal chancellery. And though it did not take long for their passion in *humane litterae* and their fundamental admiration of pagan culture to turn into (or merely be mistaken for) manifestations of immorality, Pope Martin V preferred to turn a blind eye to such calumnies and misunderstandings.

In its rebirth, Rome also attracted the most famous artists of the day: there was no lack of commissions or money to pay for them. For the frescoes (later destroyed by humidity) in the church of San Giovanni Laterano, Gentile da Fabriano received an annual compensation of three hundred florins during this period. Even the great Masaccio was drawn there, only to die of the
plague at the unacceptably early age of twenty-seven. So compelling was the allure of Rome re-
born that the temptation to go there could not be resisted by Pisanello, Fra Angelico, and Flem-
ish painter Rogier van der Weyden, among many others. Even though Florence retained its cul-
tural supremacy for a while longer, Rome was rapidly coming into its own as a formidable
contender.

In undertaking this renovation, of course, the pope received considerable help. He soon re-
alized that for his restoration project—one of the greatest the world has ever known—to suc-
ceed, the pride and the purse of the prelates and cardinals who had returned to Rome, each with
his retinue of secretaries, chamberlains, pages, and most importantly (as far as we are concerned)
cooks, had to be properly massaged and squeezed. His tactic was extraordinarily astute. After
spending the astronomical sum of fifty thousand florins to refurbish the roof and portico of St.
Peter's, he obliged all the "princes of the church" to restore their titular churches, expecting of
course that each of them would try to outdo the others.11 Once this was under way, there was no
stopping the competition, nor was there anyone who was interested in doing so. In just a few
decades, the courts of the Roman cardinals began to rival that of the Vicar of Christ. Any trace
of asceticism vanished: the cardinals' hedonistic dispositions often blurred the line between their
own lives and the kind of life they recommended for good Christians, a discrepancy that would
in short time fuel the reformist zeal of Martin Luther. They excelled in the patronage of archi-
tecture, entertainments, and of course gastronomy, or rather the art of throwing banquets.12

It is in this context that the momentous and critical contributions of Maestro Martino
and Platina become discernible, for their gastronomic approach stood in stark contrast to the
practices of Renaissance conviviality in which eating and feasting assumed primarily a polit-
ical function.

To illustrate the pomp and circumstance of the banquet tradition, let us turn to the Re-
aissance chronicler Bernardino Corio (1459–1519?), who in his Historia di Milano described in
great detail a fabulous feast held in Rome in 1473.13 It was a true feat of gastronomic delirium
prepared for the guests of Pietro Riario, cardinal of San Sisto, "who could himself be called a
true pope" (the host was not his uncle, Pope Sixtus IV, as is sometimes reported).14 The ban-
quet was held in honor of Leonora, daughter of Ferdinand I of Aragon, king of Naples, who
was passing through Rome on her way from Naples to Ferrara, where she was to meet her fu-
ture husband, Ercole I d'Este.

Writing in the service of the Sforzas, who were involved with the cardinal in dubious polit-
ical machinations, Corio had to persuade his readers that the pope was an easily expendable
character, ready to abdicate and leave the Holy See to his nephew Riario. The Sforzas went out
of their way to divulge this "secret" piece of information, which, however false it may have been,
did not do them any good: the cardinal died in 1474, probably poisoned, and Galeazzo Maria
Sforza was murdered on December 26, 1476, by three young men who dreamed of freeing Mi-
lan from the tyranny of the Sforzas as Brutus and Cassius had done for Rome when they as-
sassinated Caesar.
The combined display of theatrical pomp and culinary extravagance spells out in no uncertain terms the amphitryon’s plan to outshine whatever splendor the pope might have been capable of mustering. Since we cannot possibly recount in every detail this truly sumptuous event, in which admiration for food was more important than its consumption, let us resort to an abridged description of the banquet by Claudio Benporat, the brevity of which doesn’t lessen the visual, auditory, and even gustatory experience of the original:

The banquet . . . took place in a great hall [in the cardinal’s residence at Piazza Santi Apostoli] where there was a sideboard with twelve shelves on which gem-studded trays of silver and gold were featured. Two tables covered by four tablecloths were prepared in the middle of the hall: the first was for the seven nobles of the highest station while the other table was for the lesser among them.

In accordance with the custom in usage since the beginning of the century, the guests were still standing when they were served a meal that included trays of candied fruit covered with gold leaves and accompanied by painted glasses of malvasia. Once the guests were seated, musicians with horns and pipes announced the next dishes, which were divided into four services in correspondence with the four tablecloths that covered the tables.

The first service combined pork livers, blancmange, meats with relish, tortes and pies, salt-cured pork loin and sausage, roast veal, kid, squab, chicken, rabbit . . . whole roasted large game, and fowl dressed in their skin or feathers. Next came golden tortes and muscat pears in cups.15

And this was just the first service! At the risk of causing the reader stomachic discomfort, the following is an unexpurgated list of the foods brought forth in the remaining three services (at the end of each the tablecloth would be removed, and the guests washed their hands because they served themselves from communal trays and forks were not in use): fried dough shaped like pine cones, smothered with honey and rose water; silver-wrapped lemons in sugary syrup; relishes; pies; sturgeon and lamprey; aspics; more tortes; junket drowning in white wine; Catalan-style chicken; green blancmange; stewed veal, mutton and roebuck; suckling pig; capon; and duck and black and sour cherries macerated in Tyrian wine. And dulcis in fundo: ices, almonds, coriander seeds, anise seeds, cinnamon, and pine nuts.

But the best gauge of the feast’s unparalleled choreography is Corio’s own mouthwatering description. He devoted great attention to the coperti, or “covers”: that is, the buns distributed throughout the table and wrapped in gold and silver leaves featuring the coats of arms of the host and guest families (but also that of the Sforzas). And he concluded his portrait of the convivium with the following flourish:

[There were brought forth] confectionery victuals, three of the Labors of Hercules, that is, the Lion, the Boar, and the Bull, and each one of them was in the shape of a common man. But first Hercules, nude, with the skin of a Nemean lion and with stars on his shoulder to signify holding up the Sky; and following the labors of Hercules, grand confectionery castles were brought forth complete with towers and fortifications inside, and an infinite num-
ber of confectioneries in all different manners; and these castles with confectioneries were plundered and tossed down from the tribunal into the square to impress those present; and it seemed a great storm. Then there was brought forth a large confectionery serpent on a mountain, very lifelike. And then a dish of wild men. Afterward, perhaps ten great ships with sails and ropes, all of them confectioneries and filled with nuggets of sugar. While still eating, there was also brought forth a Mountain, from which a man jumped out, who acted very impressed with the banquet, and he said some words, but not everyone understood them.16

Of course, the serpent on the mountain is an allusion to the Sforza family (this image had appeared in the Milanese coat of arms from the times of the Visconti family). There is also a transparent homage to the house of Este, whose future was in the hands of Leonora’s husband, Ercole (Hercules) 1.

To conclude, let’s quote again from Benporat’s description of the interludes between services:

In perfect harmony with the humanist culture of the century, the performance [reflects] the event to be celebrated, the riches of the guests, and the foods served to the dining companions. The scenes are inspired thus . . . by ancient Greek figures of mythology and the use of the myths and stories of Atlas, Hippomenes, Perseus, Orpheus, Hercules with Deianira, Jason with Medea, the battle between Hercules and the centaurs, the loves of Bacchus and Ariadne. And all of it was enhanced with songs and music, and by the best wines served in golden cups.17

But not all of the princes of the Church, who had been honing their social skills (not to mention their aesthetic and sybaritic inclinations) in Rome for fifty years, were as ambitious as Riario. Their titles were often acquired through the ready money of their families for purely political motives. The power conferred upon them by their cardinal’s hat must have been an abundant source of gratification. The ample margin of tolerance they enjoyed went hand in hand with their opportunity to ask for and obtain favors from a pontiff, who, ruling over them like a feudal lord, might need their support (and their resources) at any given moment. This fact clearly made the pope sensitive and vulnerable to their requests. In the final analysis, and no matter what the specific circumstances, their exchanges were the object of a refined semiosis that went far beyond the morally defined margins of adulation. Cardinals could even convince the pope to close an eye when it came to questions of religious orthodoxy. No matter how grandiose these feasts may have been, they were often deplorably unsuited for the political ends intended by their architects.

Well aware of this, many of them preferred the company of a small number of carefully chosen souls inclined exclusively to refined entertainment. In fact, their mode of conviviality marked a fundamental break from the art of the banquet in previous generations. As food historian Massimo Montanari has shown, the traditional notion of the banquet called for victuals to be displayed before being served: the spectacle of the meal as an outward expression of
power was the primary motive of the banquet. And in some cases, Montanari goes on to explain, the hosts did not even consume the foods they showed off. For the emerging generation food was instead an opportunity to explore the depths of one’s own culture and imagination. The new ecclesiastical gourmet was undoubtedly aware that excellence was by no means a right, but rather a privilege attained by guiding desire through the solitary and harsh fields of critical awareness.

The markedly ostentatious character of banquets, writes Montanari, exemplifying his assessment with the description of the Pantagruelian meal served in Bologna in 1487 by Giovanni II Bentivoglio (to celebrate the marriage of his son Annibale to Lucrezia d’Este), reveals the “progressive introspection and closure of the dominant classes. . . .” The table was no longer a place of social cohesion centered on the leader, but rather one of separation and exclusion: a few were invited to participate; the rest were left to watch. It is equally clear that the point was not so much to show the plebs the insurmountable distance separating them from the rich and powerful (an unfortunate given of the times), but rather to humiliate somewhat their equals: individuals, families, and clans who were also rich and powerful but not quite so much as the hosting party was or pretended to be.

By contrast, for Platina and his circle of associates and patrons, intimate gatherings were de rigueur, and the cooks they employed, chief among them Maestro Martino, were meant to prepare real food for real people. On the one hand, Platina was a Humanist (with a capital H), envisioning every aspect of his life as an expression of Renaissance ideals, including the manner in which he dined, the persons with whom he broke bread, and the foods that were prepared. No dish was served at his table casually: each recipe and formula had a unique place in the humanist culinary hierarchy. Some foods had symbolic meaning; others were intended to balance the humors of his fellow revelers, and, indeed, as is clear from even a cursory reading of his On Right Pleasure and Good Health, Platina was keenly aware of his companions’ physical condition as well as their personal likes and dislikes.

On the other hand, Platina was shrewd at political jockeying. Perhaps by pure instinct, perhaps through keen observation of the world around him, he chose the horses that he would ride through his tumultuous life and career with judicious skill, although not with unerring acumen. In addition to his renown as a humanist, his culinary expertise must have helped to open the doors of the illustrious and powerful who sought to surround themselves with the greatest artists, thinkers, conversationalists, and gourmets of their day.

Platina’s association with Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga was typical in this respect. It’s not unreasonable to suppose that it was typical also of his relationship with other cardinals, such as Giovanni Bessarione (1402–72; a Greek humanist who attempted to reconcile Platonism and Aristotelianism). It was through Bessarione’s mediation that Platina was able to obtain a coveted seat in the College of Abbreviators, a prestigious appointment that lifted him from his chronic state of penury. Platina also believed (wrongly, as we shall see) that his powerful friends would shield him from the ill will of Pius II’s successor, Paul II (Venetian Cardinal Pietro Barbo,
elected in 1464), who despised humanist culture and ultimately abolished the College: in his opinion, the Platinas of the world were nothing but reborn pagans and moral degenerates.

But Platina’s most significant protector remained Cardinal Gonzaga, through whom he was introduced to the legendary household of the famous and powerful Cardinal Ludovico Trevisan, patriarch of Aquileia and employer—as previously mentioned—of Maestro Martino. It is highly probable that Platina was a member of Cardinal Gonzaga’s entourage when the latter stayed with Trevisan in Albano (just south of Rome) in June 1463. This summer month of *ritrattazione* may have been the occasion on which Platina obtained his copy of Martino’s book.\(^{21}\)

Born in Venice and educated in medicine at the University of Padua, Ludovico Trevisan (1402–65) was the son of a medical doctor. He became physician to Cardinal Condulmer, who would later, as Pope Eugenius IV, appoint him patriarch of Aquileia (where he would set foot only briefly, if at all) and titular cardinal of San Lorenzo in Damaso, where he built his legendary residence.\(^{22}\) It was through excellent military service (like his presence at Anghiari) and his Machiavellian ruthlessness that he rose to power.\(^{23}\) After the feared Cardinal Giovanni Vitelleschi was jailed and subsequently died in the Castel Sant’Angelo, Trevisan was charged with collecting the spoils from the former’s loyalists: the fulfillment of this perilous duty was fundamental in the restoration of papal authority in Rome, and it brought him immense notoriety.\(^{24}\) By 1455, he had been appointed admiral of the Papal Fleet by Calixtus III, and he was the mastermind of a crucial victory over the Turks at Mytilene in 1457. At the Congress of Mantua in 1459, he opposed Pius II’s plans for a crusade against the Turks, and he would also be remembered for his vehement—if not self-serving—opposition to the expansion of the number of cardinals.\(^{25}\) The election of Venetian Cardinal Pietro Barbo, his archrival, as Pope Paul II in 1464 is generally believed to have accelerated Trevisan’s death the following year.\(^{26}\)

But the brilliance of his political career did not in any way efface his fame as an epicure. Indeed, his love for the good life earned him the title “Cardinal Lucullus.”\(^{27}\) Trevisan was very well known and admired for his love of entertaining. His home in San Lorenzo in Damaso was the San Simeon of his day: there he collected unusual animals—like white asses, Indian hens, lapdogs, and goldfinches—and cultivated rare varietals of fruit that he obtained from his friends and from purveyors of foods.\(^{28}\)

Trevisan’s earthly splendor transpires indirectly in David Chambers’s essay “The Housing Problems of Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga,” wherein he describes the young cardinal’s difficulty in procuring suitable housing for himself and his entourage:

> Cardinals in the fifteenth century were expected to live in a style of magnificence tempered by decorum. It was not a simple formula to put into practice even at the mundane level of setting up a house, finding a seemly place of residence in Rome. . . . For just a moderate magnificence, to maintain a household of the minimum numbers which propriety demanded, accommodation could be expensive, but there was no regular system which provided cardinals with palaces or apartments in Rome as of right.\(^{29}\)
Seeking to associate her cardinal son with a great personage of the Curia, Barbara of Brandenburg wrote in 1461 to the Mantuan ambassador in Rome, Bartolomeo Bonatto, that “it would be beneficial for Francesco to live near to Cardinal Ludovico Trevisan... Apostolic Chamberlain.”

A prominent member of Francesco’s escort, Guido dei Nerli, wrote to Barbara, insinuating that the young prelate should indeed set his sights on the palace of Cardinal Ludovico Trevisan: “My most illustrious Lady,” wrote dei Nerli, “the Patriarch wears the crown in all things. His house truly seems like Paradise.” It would not be until 1467 (two years after Trevisan’s death), following many mishaps (including several plague scares), that Francesco would finally obtain the house he so coveted.

We know with relative certainty that Trevisan “took a paternal interest in Francesco Gonzaga after the latter’s arrival in Rome” and that Trevisan was “among those exciting Francesco to Christian belligerency.” Along with the many exotic gifts he bestowed on Francesco, Trevisan must have exhorted him to cultivate his skills in entertaining and to excel in his hospitality when charged with papal visits.

So obsessed was Trevisan with obtaining the finest and most unusual foods and wines for his guests that his requests for certain delicacies could easily take precedence over discussing politics in his correspondence—even when the very balance of power in Italy was at stake. After no less than three missives to his friend and putative son Onorato Caetani, lord of Sermoneta, in which he requests fish—the “finest possible”—for a dinner he will host on the occasion of Pope Nicholas V’s visit to San Lorenzo in Damaso, Trevisan mentions almost as an afterthought a political event of epochal importance:

As of this day, we have written three letters to your Magnificence, which we have scribed with our own hands and which were delivered to you by your own secretary who was here. Strangely, we have had no response from you. Now, for this reason, we are writing you again and imploring you to provide us, by way of your fishmongers, with two portions of the finest sea fish possible, and we would prefer that all of it arrive by next Monday because the seventeenth day of the month, which will be a Tuesday, is the day of the visit [of the pope] to San Lorenzo in Damaso. So we are imploring you, if possible, to serve us with these two portions of fish and we will certainly pay the fishmongers however you advise us. And may it please you that you respond by the same messenger to this letter. We believe that you have heard how Francesco [Sforza] has obtained Milan. Otherwise, no news. Rome, March 10, 1456.

In light of the fact that Francesco Sforza’s conquest of Milan was one of the great turning points in the balance of power in northern Italy, and that a mercenary like Sforza had transformed his career as soldier into that of one of the most sophisticated rulers of the Renaissance, the fish must have been very good indeed. According to Gelasio Caetani, annotator of the letters and descendant of the correspondent, they are supposed to have come from the famous fisheries of Fogliano in Friuli.

It’s no wonder, then, that Trevisan also sought the services of the greatest cook of his times,
Maestro Martino. But in order for us also to find Martino, we must return—albeit briefly—to our Platina.

Profoundly wounded in his pride as both a humanist and a consumer of fine foods by the sudden loss of his gainful employment as a papal abbreviator and his subsequent return to the poverty he thought he had escaped once and for all, Platina reacted so intensely that the man who had made him redundant, Pope Paul II, thought it best to lock him up in the recently renovated Castel Sant’Angelo. There was nothing Platina’s friends could do to avert the lightning of the pope’s fury—except to help him lick his wounds when, upon his release, he “threatened” to leave Rome, never to return. Nor was his ill fortune over just yet. He had hardly begun to savor his newly acquired freedom when the rumor spread that members of the Roman Academy, of which he was a leading figure, and its founder, Giulio Pomponio Leto, were conspiring to assassinate the reigning Vicar of Christ, whom they regarded as the principal obstacle to the realization of their republican program.

Platina would soon be arrested again, and he was tried together with a number of his fellow academicians. They were all turned loose eventually, thanks to a long display of the legal ingenuity of their counselors and Platina’s writing of a number of epistles—not exactly the most dignified examples of apologetic literature—in which he asked the Holy Father’s forgiveness, not because he had actually attempted to harm him in any way, as it were, but merely for not having done enough to shield His Holiness from his enemies.

Platina had fallen from grace as many times as he would rise back up: in the end Paul II granted clemency to nearly all the members of the Roman Academy. Three more years would elapse before this pope could join his predecessors in their eternal reward, during which time Platina stayed in Rome and enjoyed a sort of guarded freedom. But then Sixtus IV was elected pope in 1471: a spendthrift, an incorrigible nepotist, but also a wholehearted admirer of antiquity, the discovery of which, as well as the cult attached to it, was proving to be more and more exciting and had in fact reached the point of no return. Platina thus thought it advisable to dedicate to the new pope his Lives of the Popes, the first systematic survey of the papacy. This good deed landed him a remarkable job and the privilege of painterly immortality: he would be portrayed by Renaissance master Melozzo da Forlì (1438–94) in a fresco that can still be viewed today in the Pinacoteca Vaticana.

But what made Platina a citizen of high stature in the republic of gastronomy was his On Right Pleasure and Good Health, a text that outright cannibalized Maestro Martino’s Art of Cooking. Not only does this text shed light on the history of Renaissance nourishment and dietary habits, but it is also an indispensable tool for learning about the “card-carrying” members of what the author liked to refer to as the contubernium pomponianum (the group of humanists who gathered around Pomponio Leto and his Roman Academy), in terms of both their cultural formation and their guiding philosophies. By reading Platina’s pages, for instance, we become aware of the novel attention that this fellowship (young prelates, scribes and secretaries, papal abbreviators,
Inscribed to Cardinal Bartolomeo Roverella, title of San Clemente in Rome and archbishop of Ravenna (1445–76), whose powerful patronage of Platina helped to make *On Right Pleasure and Good Health* the first gastronomic treatise ever printed, the book was begun sometime before the author’s incarceration in Castel Sant’Angelo in 1464, as Platina himself declares in an undated (and most revealing) letter to Cardinal Giacomo Ammannati Piccolomini:

> Before my [first] prison term I wrote this little book, *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, which I commend to your generosity, striving eagerly to win a patron for it. As you are aware, it deals with the business of all the food merchants, and creeps through the taverns, and is, therefore *a greasy and sordid* [emphasis added] subject. But he who is versed in cookery is not far removed from genius, since the meals that are to be concocted are largely a matter of ingenious composition, and, therefore, he must be proficient in it; he who takes upon himself this work as a profession must inform himself. Of course in the last analysis, it appears to me a dry and unpolished subject, and therefore, I am cleaning it of imperfections [emphasis added] which, I have recognized, must be eliminated without fail. Surely, because good judgment in these matters will mostly benefit the superiors, I place this book, however dreadful (it certainly takes a chance with inspiring the ingenious ones, if you like) in your hands for your kind consideration and criticism, hesitatingly and also conditionally.

There is no known response from Piccolomini, but it is fair to surmise that the project—which Platina perversely called “greasy and sordid” and “unpolished”—may not have appealed to him. Yet the idea, epitomized by the perfect title, *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, is nothing short of a stroke of genius. We must assume that Roverella’s intellectual acumen was, at least in this case, a tad sharper than Piccolomini’s.

Although it is customary to translate *honesta* (as in *De honesta voluptate*) as “right,” a more accurate rendering of the original might be “permissible,”* which is *On Permissible Pleasure and Good Health*, since the term challenged the ascetic prohibitions that for so long and under so many circumstances had doomed attempts to expand the notion of food beyond mere necessary sustenance.

The reorientation of the cultural axis that was taking place in Platina’s times, on the other hand, enabled him to approach his topic from a philosophical angle, and to record his findings under a rubric combining hedonism with health, a locus of the mind where Epicurus (no longer humiliated by medieval hearsay knowledge of his writings) and archmedical doctor Hippocrates could be seen eating at the same table. It is thus crucial to emphasize the dietetic concerns illustrated by the second segment of the title (*et valetudine*).

High-ranking officers of the Church, who were supposed to frown on culturally sanctioned pleasures that enhanced the well-being of the body, were among the first to welcome the new perspective introduced by Platina. The moral issues were nullified by the medical concerns, and no one would ever object to remedies that, frankly, had never tasted better. A savory, well-
balanced meal could then be regarded as preliminary to a fine practice of intellectual pursuits. Openly contradicting the gargantuan extravaganzas of the guzzlers, gluttons, and profligates that ecclesiastical agencies had successfully dismissed for centuries, this notion canceled out the de facto connection between bodily pleasure and sin, introducing the far more sophisticated belief that culinary pleasure, on a par with pleasures of all kinds, was the ultimate goal of artistic research. Culinary application, in other words, could be placed alongside architecture, conversation, music, war, diplomacy, politics, painting, pottery making, wood carving . . . and whatever else you might want to add to the list. On Right Pleasure and Good Health, writes Emilio Faccioli in the introduction to a recent Italian edition, is not

a simple manual, nor is it a compendium . . . but rather a systematic treatment of the art of cooking, dietetics, culinary hygiene, the ethics of eating, the pleasures of the table—all things that had been substantively illustrated in writings of previous eras, although in singular instances. . . . It is a treatment organized according to a criterion that alternated technical prescriptions with moral ones relative to nutrition . . . together with observations on the nature of various foods, their nutritional and curative properties, as well as their use and their side effects.47

Notwithstanding his great familiarity with the culture of the classical world and the superb ability displayed by the author in quoting from its literature (see, for instance, his comparison of the ripening of a mulberry to the blushing of the Egyptian girl Thisbe, delicately lifted from Ovid’s Metamorphoses),48 the fact that a humanist, and a famous one at that, spent time writing about food raised more than eyebrows. Such mundane musings by a prominent man of letters were sure to inspire some more or less malicious epigrams, like the following one by Jacopo Sannazaro:

On the character, customs, life and death of the popes;
You used to write. A sharp history lesson it was.
Now, Platina, you write tractates on cooking millet
For the popes themselves to eat.49

Nor were Platina’s critics confined to the Renaissance. More than a century later, in his Ragguii di Parnaso (Advertisements from Parnassus), Traiano Boccalini imagined that the philosopher Agostino Niño da Sessa entered a shop where Platina was rolling pie dough and wrested the rolling pin from his hand to beat him with it.50 This act, as da Sessa later recounts to Apollo, was a way to avenge himself for Platina’s slandering of da Sessa as “one of those useless persons, who delighting in gluttony, study nothing but how to eat well.” Despite Platina’s apology and attempt to clear himself (from what he considers a false accusation), Apollo reprimands the humanist, telling him also how shameful it is for a philosopher to be caught visiting a food shop, “for the arms of men of honour, and of such a philosopher as is my beloved Niño, ought to be seen in libraries, not in cooks-shops, where none but those of smell-feasts ought to hang, for, there is no fouler defect nor vice, than to study how to please the palate, and to make the base and shameful profession to hunt after good victuals.”51
Like Traiano Boccalini, other detractors of Platina persisted in decrying him as a glutton. But their allegations would not have held up in a court of law. In fact, even a cursory reading of *On Right Pleasure and Good Health* reveals how, in the intimate relationship between "pleasure" and "health," the compass leans more toward medicine than toward crapulence. But most of all, the interrelationship between these two concepts provided a perspective by which the Renaissance man could see himself in a positive light, fully the peer of the ancients, in his radical return to Epicureanism. It was perhaps Platina himself who, in his dedicatory letter to Roverella, best expressed the Renaissance gourmet's *excusatio*, responding to his accusers and perfectly illustrating his *ratio scribendi*:

[Some] upbraid me about food as if I were a gluttonous and greedy man and as if I were proffering instruments of lust and, as it were, spurs to intemperate and wicked people. Would that they, like Platina, would use moderation and frugality either by nature or instruction; we would not see today so many so-called cooks in the city, so many gluttons, so many dandies, so many parasites, so many most diligent cultivators of hidden lusts and recruiting officers for gluttony and greed.

I have written about food in imitation of that excellent man, Cato, of Varro, the most learned of all, of Columella, of C. Matius, and of Caelius Apicius. I would not encourage my readers to extravagance, those whom I have always in my writing deterred from vice. I have written to help any citizen seeking health, moderation, and elegance of food rather than debauchery, and have also shown to posterity that in this age of ours men had the talents at least to imitate, if not to equal, our ancestors in any kind of *writing*.

Although he shows some humility—or is it false modesty?—in sizing himself up in relation to classical culture in the last sentence above, when it comes to gastronomy he does not hesitate to pass a verdict in favor of the moderns. Indeed, on the subject of blancmange, a recipe that he lifted nearly verbatim from Martino, Platina clearly states his preference for this dish over any proposed by Apicius: "Even if we are surpassed by [the ancients] in nearly all arts, nevertheless in taste alone we are not vanquished."

Judging from the frenzy of reprints that immediately followed the *editio princeps*, there is no doubt that the book struck a chord at the right time: it was reprinted in Venice in 1475, 1498, 1503, and 1517; in Louvain and Cividale del Friuli, 1480; in Bologna, 1499; in Strasbourg, 1517; in Cologne, 1529, 1537; in Paris, 1530; in Lyon and in Basel, 1541.

Of course Platina, just like his fellow humanists, wrote in Latin, a language in which, I am sure, they also dreamed. But a good number of readers trained in the redignified profession of cooking needed some help in deciphering his text. As a consequence, the book prolonged its life and success in an equally frantic series of translations: into Italian: 1487, 1494, 1508, and 1516; into German: 1530, 1533, 1536, and 1542; and into French: Lyon, 1505, 1528, 1548, and 1571; and Paris, 1509, 1539, 1559, and 1567. The extremely wide diffusion of the work into the major languages of Europe is testimony to the primacy of the Italian culinary canon throughout the sixteenth century. Consequently, the myriad translations into French (the language that would
definitively replace Italian as the European koine by the eighteenth century) played a clear role in the future Francophilia of European cuisine. Undoubtedly, Caterina de’ Medici’s presence in France, as well as that of her cooks with their advanced technique, also reinvigorated French cuisine with an infusion of Italian know-how and tastes around the same time that Platina’s book was becoming the first best seller in cookery book history.

Perilously balanced between gustatory enthusiasm and his claims of Franciscan sobriety, Platina sought to demonstrate that he truly practiced what he preached, maintaining that his friends—Pomponio Leto, above all—were people who shunned the idea of gulping down peacocks and pheasants, “dishes of distinguished people, and especially of those whom not virtue and hard work but fortune and the rashness of men [had] raised, by luck alone, from the depths.” They were perfectly content to dine on a few meager vegetables. Whether or not these observations are an echo of the theory whereby different social categories are endowed with varying degrees of digestive and metabolic capabilities is a matter of pure speculation: can it not be proven that there are noble and rich stomachs suited for beef steak, while there are poor stomachs at best able to digest beans, as asserted in certain socially questionable regimina sanitatis of the Middle Ages and in the fourteenth-century De sanitatis custodia, a dietary guide scribed by the renowned doctor Giacomo Albini? Speculative as this might be, Platina’s unbridled fondness for vegetables is attested to by at least two witnesses, one of them rather conspicuous.

The first was Platina’s detractor Giovanni Antonio Campano, from whom we learn that our author was unable to sing because his mouth was full of leeks and his breath reeked of onions: “Calvus, aricini sordent qui prandia porri / Laetum nec bulbos ore obulente carit.” The second was no less a charismatic personage than Leonardo da Vinci. Among the many curious aspects of Leonardo’s personality was the fact that he did not eat meat. This was so remarkable for the times that Florentine traveler Andrea Corsali related in a letter to Duke Giuliano de’ Medici, “Certain infidels called Guzzarati [Hindus] . . . do not feed upon anything that contains blood, nor do they permit among them any injury be done to any living thing, like our Leonardo da Vinci.” (Aesthetic considerations aside, might it be inferred that the protracted execution of the fresco at Santa Maria delle Grazie [1495–98] could be attributed to the artist’s embarrassment before the spectacle of saints dining on lamb’s flesh?) Indeed, for Leonardo, meat eaters were on a par with cannibals: man, he wrote, was not the king of animals but rather the king of beasts, whose gullet was the “tomb for all animals.” In a direct appeal to humankind, he asks, “Does not nature bring forth a sufficiency of simple things to produce satiety? Or if you cannot content yourself with simple things can you not by blending these together make an infinite number of compounds as did Platina and other authors who have written for epicures?”

It is perfectly legitimate to surmise that Pomponian suppers comprised more than just arugula and chicory. The “permissible” pleasures that they pursued included, besides chicken in verjuice, roast suckling pig, ground liver balls, sausages, partridge, veal’s brain, and kid in garlic. At any rate, there are a great number of purely vegetarian dishes in Platina’s recipe collection. And this, in and of itself, was an entirely novel concept. In the Middle Ages it was the poor who...
ate vegetables exclusively, mostly in the form of sops. Now, instead, the dietetic benefits of eating vegetables came to the foreground. Vegetables were recommended for those who wished to keep their minds free by not overburdening the stomach. But it was not just a select group of humanists for whom vegetables were a central part of the diet. With their cult of chard, parsnips, and parsley, grains, legumes, and sweet fruits prepared in savory dishes, the Italians caught all of Europe by surprise, overturning the old medieval preconception of meat for the rich and cabbage for the poor. As late as the end of the sixteenth century, English traveler Robert Dallingston would write:

Concerning herbage, I shall not need to speake, but that it is the most general food of the Tuscan, at whose table Sallet is as ordinary, as salt at ours, for being eaten of all sorts of persons and at all times of the yeare: of the riche because they have to spare; of the poor, because they cannot choose; of many religious because of their vow, of most others because of their want.63

Nor should we neglect the writings of Giacomo Castelvetro, who after fleeing to England to escape “the furious bite of the cruel and pitiless Roman Inquisition,” decided to teach his hosts the virtues of the many greens that were consumed in Italy. The English had actually begun to appreciate them in limited numbers, but often only as means “to beautify their gardens.” Castelvetro’s Brieve racconto di tutte le radici di tutte l’erbe e di tutti i frutti che crudi o cotti in Italia si mangiano (Brief Account of All Tubers, Greens, and Fruits That Are Eaten Raw or Cooked in Italy) is not only a small literary gem, but also a precious sign confirming the influence exerted by Platina’s work on the dietetic customs of Europe more than a hundred years after its initial publication.64

Before taking leave of Platina and giving in to the allure of Maestro Martino himself, it is important to note that the Cremonese humanist was unable to accomplish in Latin what his source had triumphantly achieved in the vernacular tongue. Platina’s humanist Latin lacked the lexical flexibility inaugurated by Martino. For example, where the latter discusses distinct types of cherries—for example, cornel cherry (cornioli), black cherry (cerase negre), and sour cherry (visciole)—the former is forced to subsume all kinds under one heading, cerasia, specifying that “some are tart, some sour, some sweet.”65 Indeed, the all-encompassing (and still unfinished) Grande dizionario della lingua italiana (the equivalent of the Oxford English Dictionary) cites Martino’s text, for example, as the first registered appearance of the term rosselli, or rose apples (see the recipe for rose-apple sauce, on page 79).

Of course, “linguistic innovator” is only one of the many titles accumulated by the Carneades and prince of cooks, who, after such a long excursus (from the restoration of Rome to popes, humanist and not, from cardinals with big ideas to jailed abbreviators), finally takes center stage.

The extraordinary importance of Maestro Martino’s Art of Cooking becomes crystal clear when his text is viewed as the cornerstone of the culinary edifice built by Platina. To begin with, all but 10 of the 250 recipes in Platina’s book (books 6–10) belong to Maestro Martino. They are
often listed in the same order in which they originally appeared and are nothing more than verbatim translations. An example of this is the recipe for red chickpea torte (see page 86). In Martino, the recipe reads as follows:

Cook a libra of red chickpeas, crush well, and together with their broth pass through a very thick stamine; and take a libra of well-peeled, blanched almonds that have been very well crushed, because they should not be passed through a stamine; and together with the almonds, crush two ounces of raisins and three or four dried figs; likewise an ounce and a half of slightly crushed pine nuts, not ground, adding some sugar, rose water, cinnamon, and ginger, mixing all these things together well. To make it thicken, incorporate some fine starch or some pike roe, as above, and cook it with a crust on the bottom; and when it appears to you to be nearly done cooking, top with some sugar and some rose water, and apply heat again from above from a high flame. Note that this torte should be short.

In Platina, as such:

Crush red chick-peas, well cooked in their own juice and with a bit of rose water. When they are crushed, pass through a sieve into a bowl. Add to this and mix a pound of almonds so ground up that it is no task to pass them through a sieve, two ounces of raisins, three or four figs crushed at the same time, besides an ounce of semipounded pine nuts, as much sugar and rose water as is enough, and the same amount of cinnamon and ginger. When they are mixed, spread in a well-oiled pan with a lower crust. Some add starch or pike eggs so that this pie becomes firmer. When it is almost cooked, you will make it browner by putting fire above it. It should be thin and covered with sugar and rose water. This food helps only the liver and stomach.66

Platina's only contribution here is the medical advice added at the end of the recipe.67

The modern revival of interest in Maestro Martino and his relationship to Platina began in 1927, when Joseph Dommers Vehling (1879–1950), American chef and hotelier, gentleman, scholar, and bibliophile, purchased a copy of Martino's manuscript from an Italian antiquarian. In the October 1932 issue of Hotel Bulletin and the Nation's Chefs, of which he was editor, he published a notice of his discovery that the author was indeed the very same Martino whom Platina had acknowledged as his source. He would later develop this piece, “Martino and Platina: Exponents of Renaissance Cookery,” into his major oeuvre, Platina and the Rebirth of Man (1941). The manuscript, which for many years was the only known text attributed to the Renaissance cook, was eventually donated to the Library of Congress (where it still is kept) in 1941. In the 1930s, Vehling lectured on ancient and Renaissance cookery at Cornell University (in 1936, he published the first English translation of Apicius's De re coquinaria, which, together with his Platina and the Rebirth of Man, represents a great contribution to the study of historical gastronomy). Scholars and food historians are greatly indebted to the enthusiasm and entrepreneurship of Mr. Vehling, who nearly single-handedly restored Platina's name to the annals of food scholarship and history after centuries of denigration and neglect. His library of rare culi-