

FOOD CULTURE, FOOD HISTORY BEFORE 1900



Laura Giannetti

# Food Culture and Literary Imagination in Early Modern Italy

## The Renaissance of Taste

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in Early Modern Italy



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# Food Culture, Food History before 1900

The expanding interest that food studies have elicited in the past few decades confirms the importance of a field that is still very much in the making. The history and cultures of food have been the object of wide-ranging methodological approaches: literary, cultural, economic, and material (to name just a few), and continue to elicit contributions from all the major disciplines.

The series publishes monographs on the history and culture of food, and hosts contributions from different fields, historiographic approaches, and perspectives. Contributions cover a long chronological period running from the Middle Ages to the early nineteenth century, respecting the distinctive time frames of food history. A similar criterion determines the wide geographic parameters that the series follows. As of the later Middle Ages, food and cuisine traveled with extreme ease not only within the European continent but increasingly to other parts of the world. The purview of this series thus comprises contributions including Europe, the Atlantic world, as well as exchanges with Asia and the Middle East.

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# Food Culture and Literary Imagination in Early Modern Italy

*The Renaissance of Taste*

*Laura Giannetti*

Amsterdam University Press



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- ‘Renaissance Food-Fashioning or The Triumph of Greens’. *California Italian Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (2009-2010): 1-16.
- ‘Of Eels and Pears: A Sixteenth-Century Debate on Taste, Temperance and the Pleasures of the Senses’. In *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler, 289-305. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012.
- ‘“Taste of Luxury” in Renaissance Italy: in Practice and in the Literary Imagination’. In *Luxury and the Ethics of Greed in Early Modern Italy*, ed. by Catherine Kovesi, pp. 73-94. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2018.
- ‘The Sausage Wars: Or How the Sausage and Carne Battled for Gastro-nomic and Social Prestige in Renaissance Literature and Culture’. In *Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Jacqueline Murray and Nicholas Terpstra, pp. 160-179. London and New York: Routledge, 2019.

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# Introduction

## Abstract

This study – which emerged from a casual interest in apparently insignificant accounts of dinners and dining in Italian Renaissance comedies – reveals and subjects to thematic and theoretical analysis the complex and conflicted world of food culture in sixteenth-century Italy as it developed in a wide range of literary texts. The literary imagination is here reconsidered from the perspective of food culture, a lens that exposes what I argue is a circular model of food and literary production in which practice influences both imagination and literature, which in turn impact the world of everyday life. The literary imagination of food thus becomes not only a way of exploring changes in the understanding of food and the notion of taste but also a driving force behind the Cinquecento turn that took place in both literature and food culture of the period.

**Keywords:** food, taste, literature, Cinquecento, *appetito*, *gusto*

Over the last thirty years, the study of food, eating, and food culture in early modern Italy has become an exciting and significant new item on the scholarly agenda of historians, art historians, and literary critics. A summary of the evolution of this vast and rapidly changing field – which began in the 1960s and 1970s as a fairly traditional history of food and agriculture but is continuously emerging as a much more wide-ranging and inclusive material and cultural history – is beyond the scope of either this book or its brief introduction.<sup>1</sup> What I offer here instead is a brief account of the paths that led me, in the course of a career spent reading Italian Renaissance

<sup>1</sup> Interested readers can, however, find such a summary amongst the scholarly works that have been most important for this book, including Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*; Flandrin and Montanari, *Food: A Culinary History*; Montanari, *Nuovo Convivio*; Montanari, *Il cibo come cultura*; Gautier and Grieco, 'Food and Drink'; Grieco, *Food, Social Politics and the Order of Nature*; Capatti and Montanari, *La cucina Italiana*; Camporesi, *Il paese della fame*; Elias, *Civilizing Process*; McIver, *Cooking and Eating*; Albala, *Cultural History of Food*; Pilcher,

literature, to write about the Renaissance of taste as it appears in the literary imagination of sixteenth-century Italian authors.

My interest in this topic emerged from an intensive and extensive, if not nearly exhaustive, reading of Italian Renaissance comedies – both the well-known and the virtually unknown – undertaken as research for my first book, *Lelia's Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy*. Many of these comedies present a scene in which, around tables set for dinner, parasites,<sup>2</sup> servants, lower-class characters, and old men in love<sup>3</sup> discuss the properties and attractiveness of certain foods or dream of enjoying feasts of impressive abundance. These scenes seem primarily to serve an illustrative (and at times humorous) purpose: rather than being highly relevant to the plot, they tend to appear more concerned with giving a colorful, contemporary feel to the play's characters and to the context in which they are operating. Perhaps because of their 'minor' or 'marginal' status in Cinquecento comedy, these food scenes have been little studied – although it is worth noting that, quite recently, a number of Pietro Aretino's and Giambattista della Porta's plays have received significant scholarly attention from the perspective of eating and food.<sup>4</sup> In general, however, such critical analysis focuses on the 'low' character of the servants, who are excluded from the lavish dinners their masters enjoy, or on the equally low character of the gluttonous parasites, who constantly seek to wrangle invitations to dinner: as reflections of a traditional vision of the 'world upside down', such scenes are usually discussed tangentially, seen as comic relief less worthy of serious study.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, these scenes clearly refer to the broader social and cultural world of the day, in which food and food culture played a meaningful role.

'Cultural Histories of Food'; Gentilcore, *Food and Health*; Nicoud, *Les régimes de santé au moyen âge*; Varriano, *Taste and Temptations*.

2 Parasites, in the comedies of the Italian Renaissance, are the rather unsavory characters derived from Latin literature (Plautus in particular) who are constantly hungry and always looking to eat for free. See for instance Stragualcia in *Gl'Ingannati* (Intronati) and Pasifilo in *I Suppositi* (Ariosto).

3 On old men in love and aphrodisiacal foods in comedies, see Giannetti, 'The Satyr in the Kitchen Pantry'.

4 On food and consumption in Aretino's comedies, see Biow, *In Your Face*, pp. 63–91 (for parasites and food in particular, see pp. 71–84). On della Porta, see Kodera, 'Bestiality and Gluttony in Theory and Practice'; Beecher and Ferraro, introduction to *The Sister*; Weintritt, *Culinary Professions*.

5 For the world-upside-down topos, see the foundational studies: Cocchiara, *Il mondo alla rovescia*; Casali and Capaci, *La festa del mondo rovesciato*; Burke, *Popular Culture*; Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture*; Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*. More recently, see: Robert-Nicoud, *The World Upside Down*, pp. 1–15.



Sixteenth-century comedies are of course not the only texts that have intriguing and suggestive insights into the relationship between literature and food culture. Though from a slightly earlier period, the mock-heroic poems *Morgante* (1483) by Luigi Pulci and *Baldus* by Teofilo Folengo (1517) had already become a significant source for literary scholars of food culture, with good reason. Pulci's *Morgante* and Margutte are the giant and half-giant protagonists of a poem in which the main adventures are more culinary than military. *Baldus* opens its send up of the knight-errant tradition with a mock invocation of fat Muses who live on top of a high mountain, busily grating cheese and cooking *tagliatelle* and *gnocchi*; it is there that Folengo, looking for divine inspiration, declares that he has found his *macaroneam artem* (art of making *macaroni* or *gnocchi*).<sup>6</sup> *Morgante* and *Baldus* have most often been studied as poems of 'fat eating',<sup>7</sup> although recently some have reassessed the treatment of food excess and abundance in *Baldus*<sup>8</sup> and have advanced political interpretations for *Morgante*.<sup>9</sup> In contrast with this literature of excess and gluttony there is a significant literary tradition that focuses on dearth and misery – two sides of the same coin in a food culture of hunger and frequent lack. Plays written by actor and playwright Ruzante along with popular poetry produced by the prolific *cantastorie* (literally 'singer of tales', hereafter translated as 'storyteller') Giulio Cesare Croce feature ever-famished servants, soldiers, and peasants on an eternal quest for food and survival.<sup>10</sup>

Taken together, these works seemed to exhaust the two major kinds of food representations in sixteenth-century Italian literature: Cuccagna – Cockaigne, or the Land of Plenty – contrasted with dearth; lavish court

6 'Sed prius altorium vestrum chiamare bisognat, o macaroneam Musae quae funditis artem' (Ma prima bisogna invocare il vostro aiuto, o Muse che scodellate l'arte macaronica); Folengo, *Baldus*, vol. 1, pp. 5-6.

7 *Il grasso mangiare* is an expression often used in Italian literary criticism to indicate the commonly occurring scenes in mock epic poems where characters voraciously eat all sorts of food, especially meat. See for instance the figure of the cook – the half-giant Margutte – in *Morgante* and the banquet scene at the French court in *Baldus*.

8 Mario Chiesa, the most recent editor of *Baldus*, underlines how positive characters in the poem often enjoy restrained meals. See Chiesa, introduction to Folengo, *Baldus*, p. 22. An example is the simple rustic meal offered by Berto Panada, a peasant in Cipada, who gives refuge to Guidone and Baldovina after their flight from Paris.

9 See Chiesa, introduction to *Baldus*, and Palma, *Savoring Power*, pp. 89-15. On *Baldus*, see also Woodhouse, 'Teofilo Folengo'. On the voracious appetite of *Morgante* and Margutte in Pulci's poem, see Garrido, 'Le theme de la "grande bouffe"'.  
10 As an introduction to Ruzante and the theme of hunger, see Carroll, *Angelo Beolco*; Zancarani, 'El mal de la loa chez Ruzante'; Henke, 'Comparing Poverty'; Henke, *Poverty and Charity*; Daddario and Zerdy, 'When You Are What You Eat'; Rouch, introduction to *L'Eccellenza e Trionfo del Porco*.

banquets contrasted with simple, humble meals.<sup>11</sup> As I read and reflected further on texts less studied from the perspective of food culture, however, it became clear that Cinquecento literature offered a much more complex picture worthy of deeper study. At the same time, the potential richness of this material carried with it a significant methodological problem: to base a study on single authors, their distinctive poetics, and the specific ways they were influenced by food culture seemed to imply that literature and food culture were two separate worlds that might sometimes cross paths in a given text.

According to a long-standing narrative of sixteenth-century food culture, dining and dining practices crossed the threshold of literature via a process that mirrored Norbert Elias's *Civilizing Process*, wherein literary writing on food evolved from a kind of naturalism and materialism in Pulci's fifteenth-century *Morgante* to a more 'civilized' sixteenth-century world of Ariostean and Tassian knights and their feasts; from Folengo's fat and funny Muses to the good manners of Italian courtiers so famously depicted in Castiglione's *Cortegiano* and della Casa's *Galateo*. Against my readings of Cinquecento literature, however, this narrative seemed unconvincing – especially when I turned to the work of historians on the many and diverse aspects of sixteenth-century food culture related to class and social standing; medical learning and dietary regimes; the ontological, metaphorical, and symbolic status of many foods; ideas about moderation and restraint; the embodied or material experience of eating; gender and sexuality; taste and the pleasures of the senses. Moreover, reading beyond both the literary and the food culture canons made it evident that there is yet more to explore: so-called 'minor' works of sixteenth-century poetry and prose, comedies, private letters, diaries, dialogues, and collections of lesser-known novelle.

This diverse literature, embedded in and interacting with various contexts and discourses, uses playful and skeptical stories involving food culture to show how notions of medical food culture imported from the past – the Greek and Roman as well as the medieval worlds – were no longer trustworthy; to address issues around social hierarchies, rules, and prejudices; to deal with the ongoing conflict between experience and practice on the one hand and acquired ancient wisdom on the other (in particular via powerful examples of the discrepancy between food practices, ideals, and taboos); to explore sexuality and gender through a kind of 'embodied imagination' – the materiality of the felt experience of tasting fruits and vegetables. Ultimately,

11 On Cuccagna, see Boiteux, 'L'immaginario dell'abbondanza alimentare'. For an overview of the theme of excess and gluttony, see Varotti, 'Abbuffata'.

the corpus of materials under discussion here reveals a highly articulated constellation of food discourses that resonated with a contemporary ethos as well as with a medical and gastronomic culture – and, importantly, with people’s experiences, everyday language, and practices. What we might call the literature of food discourse – dietary manuals, cookbooks, and commentaries written in the vernacular that were printed and distributed widely – were in constant circulation and became known to less educated readers and to even semi-literate readers, as well as to literary authors who engaged with them in multiple ways in their own work.

This book thus explores simultaneously the deeply interrelated worlds of literature and food culture, exposing their many common themes, preoccupations, and mutual influences. My approach to the literary texts discussed in this book is broadly cultural, enabling consideration of an expansive number of genres and texts as well as concentrated interest in what I think of as the Renaissance ‘food imaginary’. It is a truism to affirm that literary texts are neither solely fiction nor a straightforward echo of reality; to explore the area of interaction between the two can spark some stimulating surprises, which I hope will happen with this book. Of course, though speaking of cultural circulation and exchange in the Italian Renaissance is relatively commonplace, I would like to stress the relevance of these concepts for the present study, which seeks to dismantle binary thinking in terms of a simple conversation between a ‘lower’ culture of food and a ‘higher’ literary culture<sup>12</sup>. Instead, what emerges forcefully and fruitfully from the widely flung readings that inform this volume is the circular nature of sixteenth-century exchanges between food culture, which brought many issues to contemporary literature, and literary texts on and about food, which in turn contributed compellingly to changing perspectives in food culture. The eclectic methodology developed herein thus foregoes focusing on individual authors in an attempt to recognize, confront, and analyze the complex and intertwined significance of different types of sources (theoretical, prescriptive, descriptive, and imaginative)

12 The reader will find in this book few references to Mikhail Bakhtin’s rather ahistorical and all-inclusive treatment of the grotesque and carnivalesque body; of the relation between high and low; and of Carnival and Lent – all of which, until not long ago, seemed a necessary aspect of many studies of sixteenth-century food culture and literature. Bakhtin’s analysis of the meaning of food in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* has indeed been used to study the grotesque appetite of Margutte and Morgante in Pulci’s poem, a work well known to Rabelais. See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 341. As more recent work has shown, however, the voracious appetite of the two giants is more complicated and can be read, for example, as a critique of Marsilio Ficino’s philosophy of high love and beauty (Palma, *Savoring Power*).

operating in dialogue with each other. Also avoided here is recourse to the broad theories of Louis Marin and Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose foundational works on food as a sign exemplifying ideologies and attitudes as well as upon the transformation of nature into culture through the act of cooking are well known and have long been seen as suggestive and theoretically valuable.<sup>13</sup> While the literary narration of a meal may often be a symbolic or encoded form of communication, this was not always and not necessarily the norm. Similarly, Lévi-Strauss's equation of raw food with nature and cooked food with culture may be an important concept but it needs historical grounding, qualification, and analysis, and cannot therefore be used as a preamble suitable for every occasion. Instead, I would like to underline how important the works of Ken Albala, Alberto Capatti, Allen Grieco, and Massimo Montanari have been as the foundation for my inquiry and writing, supplemented by recent critical studies concerning the history of the senses, sexuality, gender, and material culture.

This book is centered on the sixteenth century, with necessary references to the previous two centuries, because the Cinquecento was a period of significant change in the way food was understood. A crucial component of this shift in understanding was the printing press's dissemination of health and food manuals written in the vernacular that were thereby made accessible to a larger public. Thus we have a new circulation of not only medical but also other understandings of food in the sixteenth century. We owe to Jean Louis Flandrin the initial explanation of what he called the 'passage from dietetics to gastronomy' – the shift from a conception of food as medicine to a conception of food as pleasure that this book explores – which recent criticism has qualified. According to Florent Quellier, who provides a good overview of the debate, the Galenic principles that dominated dietetics until the sixteenth century lost strength due to several factors. New studies on anatomy and digestion questioned the Galenic conception of the body and the ancient dietetic prescriptions; the growing importance of the taste of food over and above its healthiness, helped to move thinkers and eaters towards a conception of food as a pleasure.<sup>14</sup> What I add to this vision is the way this transition was anticipated in the sixteenth century and the food culture of Italy. Another important development was the changing vision of social

13 Marin, *Food for Thought*; Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*.

14 Quellier, *Gola Storia di un peccato capitale*, pp. 122-124. See also Leischziner, 'Epistemic Foundation of Cuisine', which argues for the slow but ongoing separation of cooking and dietetics owing to a fundamental shift in experimental sciences in seventeenth-century France. On changes in European court cuisine and notions of diet and health during the seventeenth century see Laudan, 'A Kind of Chemistry'.



hierarchies in the urban world of the Italian Renaissance and the closely related conception of the hierarchy of food. Formerly based on the medieval Great Chain of Being and traditionally fashioned as a social and cultural discourse, changes in hierarchies had implications reaching far beyond dietetic recommendations. Literary works of the period, when considered from the perspective of food culture, all portray an imagined order of things that goes beyond traditional scholarly interpretations of reversals and the upside-down world to respond to a series of specific historical concerns and developments. In fact, the literary imaginary of sixteenth-century Italy played a significant role in the complex social debates that spawned major changes in the perception of food, diet, and the meaning of meals, as well as their relation to class and social standing. Over time these texts contributed to a changing view of food and eating, helping to reverse traditional negative perceptions of types of foods and practices considered sinful – such as gluttony – while promoting a novel idea of taste.

According to the intellectual tradition inherited from the ancient world, taste, along with touch, was considered a ‘material’ sense and was located at the bottom of the five sense hierarchy that saw ‘spiritual’ sight ranking at the top. In fact, prescriptive literature, food manuals, household books, and philosophical and religious works of the period seldom took taste into account; medical texts regularly rejected it, stressing that food was to be used as a medicine and not for pleasure; preachers recommended that women should not seek enticing tastes in food. Literature often agreed with this vision, especially in fanciful representations of gluttony and excess, where the focus was on greed and abundance, not on taste. Significantly, though, during the research for this book, I encountered more and more remarks about the importance of and instances of enthusiasm for a positive idea of taste – *gusto* in the language of the period – expressed in different forms in the literary imagination, whether in prose, poetry, or personal letters.<sup>15</sup>

15 One of the first instances of the usage of the word *gusto* in the gastronomical/medical realm is from the beginning of the fifteenth century in a letter written by the physician Lorenzo Sassoli to his patient, the Florentine merchant Francesco di Marco Datini. After advising his patient what to eat to preserve his health, Sassoli added an interesting note: ‘ma ben mi piacerebbe molto, se grande dispiacere non vi fosse al *gusto*, che in ogni vostra scodella voi usaste il zafferano’ (but it would please me well, if it be no great displeasure to your taste, that in every one of your dishes you were to use saffron); Mazzei, Ser Lapo. *Lettere di un notaro*, pp. 370–374 at 371. Thus, for Sassoli, even his medically recommended use of the costly spice saffron must bow to Datini’s personal taste. It is true that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, despite many recommendations for and against specific foods, one of the prevalent medical concepts related to food was that what tastes good to an individual is more nourishing, and thus healthier, for them. As Montanari explains, it was after all the flavor of a certain food that constituted the

A recent study on taste in early modern Europe that focuses on France affirms that the discussion of taste was present in the works of cooks but claims that, outside of that ‘culinary universe, taste was left at the margins of knowledge’.<sup>16</sup>

Given the ambiguities of the concept of ‘taste’ in the English language, the present book privileges the word *gusto* as used by sixteenth-century Italian authors.<sup>17</sup> In the texts studied herein, *gusto* refers to the gustatory act – the physical sensation in the mouth during the act of eating, that is, sensory taste – as well as to personal preference – the specific disposition of an eater and his or her ability to discern or judge food aesthetically. This book shows that, by the sixteenth century, *gusto* had already acquired a metaphorical sense in relation to food, though *gusto* as an aesthetic concept is most often linked (by contemporaries as well as by scholars of the period) to the visual, not culinary, arts. Vasari, for instance, affirmed that Michelangelo had ‘giudizio e gusto in tutte le cose’, indicating his ability to recognize artistic quality.<sup>18</sup> The many letters exchanged by Pietro Aretino and some of his friends during the first half of the sixteenth century provide evidence of the early usage and development of the concept.<sup>19</sup> Besides Aretino, who was a great innovator of both language and genres, many other authors of letters, dialogues, poems, and other writings studied in this book employ

primary means of recognizing its usefulness for the body consuming it, in accordance with the degree of pleasure it brought to the palate. Sassoli’s preoccupation with Datini’s taste seems compliant with this dictum. See Montanari, *Il formaggio con le pere*, pp. 93–94.

16 See von Hoffmann, *From Gluttony to Enlightenment*, p. 172.

17 The Italian word *gusto* does not here refer to the Italianate English word used to indicate enthusiastic enjoyment.

18 Milanesi, *Le Vite de’ più eccellenti pittori*, p. 272.

19 See for instance the letter written to Aretino by Francesco Perrocco and Alessandro de la Salla: ‘Certo che I vostri bei concetti quali frutti del vostro felice ingegno, sono paruti diversi, aguzzandoci hora l’appetito, il mordace e acuto dele vostre vive e vere riprensioni hora empiedoci il molto delle vostre lodi, hora diletando *il gusto* quel saporito e dolce delle vostre amorevoli dimostrazioni’ (Indeed your fine thoughts – fruits of your blessed genius – are different, now stimulating our appetite, now, with the biting acuity of your lively and true understandings, satisfying us to the utmost with your praises, now delighting *the palate* with the flavor and sweetness of your loving gestures); *Libro secondo delle lettere scritte al signor Pietro Aretino*, pp. 338–339. Hieronymo Fracastoro thanks Aretino for a gift of poems using the term: ‘Posso dirvi che a me furon gratissimi per molto che io poco *gusto* abbia de le cose di questa lingua’ (I can tell you that I found many of them very pleasing as someone who has little *taste* for the things of this tongue); *Libro secondo delle lettere scritte al signor Pietro Aretino*, pp. 429–430. See also the letter by Aretino to his friend Gianfrancesco Pocopanno: ‘I frutti del vostro ingegno e del vostro orto mi son stati si soave amo a l’intelletto e *al gusto*, che altro tale non ho provato fin qui’ (The fruits of your genius and of your garden were a truly pleasing bait for my intellect and *my taste* than any others that I have tried until now); Aretino, ‘Letter to Messer Gianfrancesco Pocopanno’, p. 614.

the word *gusto* in relation to food and to physical as well as aesthetic sense beyond the visual arts.<sup>20</sup>

This volume demonstrates how the concept of *gusto* emerged as a significant, even revolutionary idea in the culture and society of sixteenth-century Italy – a century earlier than is normally recognized. The process, again, was circular: the food cultures of Italian courts and wealthy cities such as Rome, Mantua, and Venice appear to have been the driving force behind a new, deeper, and fundamentally positive vision of the sense of taste in everyday practice. That vision and practice were picked up by and reinforced in the literary imaginary, where the older emphasis on abundance and on greedy eating lost ground to a focus on a certain discernment and a taste for food that was unusual and pleasurable. If we think of taste as a historically constructed concept instead of as, primarily, an intellectual concern of aesthetics and philosophy, it becomes clear that taste had a more wide-ranging and practical historical impact that turned on specific social and cultural contexts.

*Gusto*, then – as will become clear in the following chapters – is a revolutionary concept in a society and during a historical period where famine and lack of food were the norm for many, whether poor or rich, and where fear of hunger and its disruptive social repercussions found solace and relief in dreams of abundance, even gluttony. It is surprisingly revolutionary that notions such as *appetito* and *gusto del mangiare* are even to be found in

20 Outside of Aretino's circle, see for instance Benedetto Varchi: 'L'orazione del Pandolfini fu da molti tenuta una cosa bella quanto alle parole e al modo di recitarla; ma molti, che per mio giudizio erano di miglior *gusto*, la chiamarono una filastrocca' (Many people considered Pandolfini's oration to be as beautiful in its language as in its delivery; but many, who had better *taste* to my mind, called it a nursery rhyme); Varchi, *Storia Fiorentina*, p. 529. Giovanni Strozzi, in his 'lettione' on Dante, explains his usage of the word: 'A me basta per il presente luogo haverlo dimostro in parte, quale dice il Poeta essere tale, che chi lo rimira non può essere che non *gusti* Iddio; vuol dire che non può essere che non contempli e non intenda Iddio aggiugnendo allo intendere che s'intenda con piacere, e è quello che noi diciamo fruire e godere. Conciosiache per *gustare* come abbiamo detto, questo ci si denoti, presa ottima e corrispondente similitudine dal *gusto*; imperoché, si come per il *gusto* noi vegniamo in cognizione dei sapori, e ne pigliamo diletto [...] così per l'intelletto conosciamo Iddio, che non si può comprendere d'alcuno senso' (For me it is enough to have clarified here in part what the Poet says about this, which is that whoever sees Him cannot but *taste* God; that is to say, that he cannot but contemplate and understand God, and more than that understanding, to delight in that understanding, which is what we call to enjoy and to relish. This being the case, *to taste*, as we have said, here denotes a complete and corresponding reception similar to *taste*; however, whereas through *taste* we become aware of flavors, and we derive pleasure from them, through intellect we become aware of God, who cannot be understood through any [human] sense); 'Lettione di Giovanni Strozzi', c. 51r. The word *gusto* appears in a wide variety of contexts in poems by Francesco Berni and in letters by Isabella d'Este and Suor Maria Celeste Galilei (see Chapter 4).

multiple texts in an historical period where many lived with the real fear of starvation, and famine was a regular black cloud that cast a shadow over both the poor and the rich.<sup>21</sup> The literature explored in this book includes many instances of lower class characters appearing interested in food that tastes good – especially in meat and luxury foods reserved for the rich – a phenomenon that traditional criticism has tended to overlook.<sup>22</sup> Here, therefore, the literary imagination is revealed to envision people with few means – even nuns in convents – advancing demands (shown as legitimately theirs to entertain) for the pleasure to be found in good eating and, furthermore, demonstrating themselves to be capable of good taste.

Montanari suggested years ago that we consider more carefully the ‘mechanism of taste formation’ in sixteenth-century Italy.<sup>23</sup> This book argues that an important player in the functioning of this mechanism is literature.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the addition of an Italian literary dimension to Montanari’s perceptive suggestion calls into question – or at least suggests the need for a deeper historical perspective – on a widely accepted historical narrative that affirms there was no developing sense of taste and/or discussion of it until at least mid-seventeenth-century France. Jean-Louis Flandrin’s well-known notion of the ‘liberation of the gourmet’ is usually seen as a brand new paradigm through which traditional ideals of Renaissance dietetics and of a mostly medical vision of food were overthrown in favor of taste.<sup>25</sup> As the discussions below demonstrate, however, this historiography may well need to be revised in light of the evidence provided by sixteenth-century Italian literature.

What I suggest is a Cinquecento revolution in taste and food culture traced across the four chapters that follow. The first of these, ‘Italian Renaissance Food-Fashioning’, considers the importance and usefulness of a significant range of foodstuffs. In the sixteenth century, prescriptive discourses concerning food and the traditional social classification of food itself – as exemplified by the hierarchical image of the Chain of Being – were taken up by the literary imaginary, which often reversed the social implications of specific foodstuffs in response to new understandings of what different social groups were supposed to eat. In the various texts analyzed, which

21 See for instance Chapter 2 on Ruzante and Chapter 4 on Moderata Fonte’s dialogue and letters by Suor Maria Celeste Galilei.

22 See Giannetti, ‘Taste of Luxury’, pp. 73–94.

23 Montanari, *Il cibo come cultura*, pp. 73–79 (‘Il gusto è un prodotto culturale’) and pp. 85–88 (‘Il gusto è un prodotto sociale’).

24 Montanari and Grieco were the first to show how the literary imaginary should be included in the study of early modern food culture.

25 Flandrin, ‘From Dietetics to Gastronomy’.



consistently emphasize the growing importance of the sense of taste, we are presented with lower-class characters who are no longer intent on merely filling their bellies but want instead to eat well and with *gusto* – a term I use here to mean both pleasure and taste. With this in mind, the discussion focuses on what I call, with a nod to Stephen Greenblatt, the new ‘food fashioning’ of the period: the way in which food traditionally seen as a luxury reserved for the upper classes – and especially upper-class males – comprising, above all, fruit and roasted fowl, ‘descended’ from what might be considered – with excuses to the Muses of Poetry – the Parnassus of Food to garner a place at the metaphorical and real table of the up-and-coming classes emergent in the more socially complex urban world characterizing Cinquecento Italy. The reverse was also true, as the changing status of vegetables from rustic – literally low – food to much appreciated aristocratic delicacy became a distinctive trait of Italian cuisine and culinary culture from the sixteenth century on.

In the second chapter, ‘Sixteenth-Century Food Wars’, the discussion moves to an analysis of the complex contemporary debate about food, morals, and beliefs, along with the concomitant obsessions about a healthy diet and moderation in eating. Some, including the playwright Ruzante (Angelo Beolco, 1496-1542), advocated formally for greater appreciation of good (higher quality, delicious) food – not just an abundance of it – for poor peasants; others made use of innovative poetic forms to offer learned and playful digressions on, for example, melons – a supposedly dangerous fruit – and the sensuous common meats, such as the lowly but tasty pork sausage. Literary exchanges – at times intensely polemical, at times humorously irreverent about temptation and restraint; discipline and the pleasures of the flesh – blossomed around suspect foods, catalyzing a cultural battle whose parameters included medical prohibitions of certain foods; religious associations between eating meat and lust; and popular lore regarding health and pleasure. While a moral and disciplinary impulse sought to control the discourse on food, especially in medical and dietetic treatises, a counter-argument was playfully advanced in sixteenth-century literature that defended and promoted a new appreciation of *gusto* and the legitimation of the idea of taking pleasure in eating.<sup>26</sup> These ‘Food Wars’ were in some

26 The idea of taking honest pleasure in eating was first formulated in Platina’s *De honesta voluptate et valetudine*. In the text’s dedicatory letter to Cardinal Roverella, Platina defends his work, which promotes pleasure in eating and physical well-being, from detractors whom he fears may accuse him of being a glutton, stressing the importance of self-control and moderation when eating to avoid succumbing to greed and gluttony. See Platina, *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, pp. 100-103 (Letter to Father Roverella). During Platina’s time, Lorenzo Valla’s

ways just more among many wars that troubled sixteenth-century Italy, yet in opposing supporters of a moralistic and medical view of food with those keen to advance ideas about taste and food-related pleasures, this particular culture war helped nurture a positive and more complex vision of taste.

Chapter Three, 'Attending the Poetic Banquets: The Erotics of Food Poems and the Discovery of Taste', takes up the rich literary production that uses food images to talk about eroticism, sexuality, and gender. Poems in *terza rima* – long considered playful, nonsense-style, and thus largely meaningless – and the prose production that commented on them, make use of humorous, mocking, and outrageous sexualized food images, in particular of vegetables and fruit, to rethink both sexual values and food practices in often quite radical ways. This chapter reconsiders this literature in relation to the medical-dietetic manuals that clearly influenced its clever word play and satire, the latter reflecting a traditional medical perspective that stigmatized many foods and contemporary conceptions of sexual identity and sexuality that the former regularly ridiculed with pointed wit and rejected with disarming humor. Relying primarily on the little-studied corpus of Bernesque<sup>27</sup> poetry and prose, the chapter uses the critical concept of 'embodied imagination' to reconsider a contemporary imaginary that grows out of sensory and material perceptions of fruit and vegetables expressed in culturally specific language, references to material culture, and cultural abstractions.<sup>28</sup> The imagination embodied in a carrot or a peach bespeaks a cultural vision that blends together their shapes, their nutritional characteristics, their metaphorical implications, their related history, and the physical sensations they elicit, in order to express, discuss, and often contest contemporary ideas and values. In the end, the embodied experience of eating and tasting fruits and vegetables – both literally and metaphorically – becomes a vehicle for conveying new and potentially radically innovative ideas about sexual and gastronomical *gusto*.

The final chapter, 'Femininity and Food Culture in Renaissance Italy', begins with an analysis of the prescriptive and moralistic literature that

dialogue *De voluptate* (1431) also discussed the Epicurean and Stoic concepts of *voluptas* and *virtus* and defended the senses and the sense of taste within the Christian tradition. For Valla, the fulfilment of pleasure is the fulfilment of true good (*summum bonum*). Platina, in contrast, does not seem to be interested in a Christian vision of pleasure. For a discussion of the notions of *voluptas* in Valla's *On Pleasure* and Platina's *De honesta voluptate*, see Palma, *Savoring Power*, esp. pp. 101-104.

27 Named for Francesco Berni (1497-1535), 'inventor' of a type of satirical poetry that became a successful genre in sixteenth-century Italian literature.

28 See Pilcher, 'Embodied Imagination'.



dictated behavior for women in the realm of food and cooking for the family, then turns to women's voices in letters by Isabella d'Este and Virginia Galilei as well as in Moderata Fonte's all-female dialogue *The Worth of Women*. The yawning gap that is revealed between these two kinds of sources on women's food practices is remarkable. Evidently the social, symbolic, and cultural meanings of food for women, as understood in prescriptive literature, played a significant role in the realm of gender stereotypes that often served to strengthen a decidedly unequal gender (im)balance. This great divide between prescriptive literature and women's voices, which has been traced so productively outside the realm of food studies by scholars of early modern writings by and about women,<sup>29</sup> once again demonstrates that traditional prescriptive fears about women and their behavior when eating and drinking was far from everyday practice in sixteenth-century Italy – even as it alerts us to a much wider range of assumptions that underlie the dynamics of gender roles in the period regarding food, taste, and sense perceptions. The diverse sources investigated by this chapter are a window onto a complex world of imagined and real food where, despite medical and moral prescriptions, at least some women eat and cook what they like – literarily, what appeals to their taste with little regard for doctors' orders or the worries of moralists – and where their pleasures in eating imply neither gluttony nor sexual excess but instead refined taste and *gusto del mangiare* (pleasure and discernment in eating).

*Food Culture and Literary Imagination in Early Modern Italy: The Renaissance of Taste* considers the complex cultural processes that brought food into a broader literary and cultural arena, granting it potential to have felt impact on contemporary thinking about a wide variety of social and cultural phenomena. The volume shows, for instance, how the Renaissance encounter between literature and food culture helped construct a kind of 'food-fashioning' in which status and wealth came to play less of a role in the imagining and partaking of food. The book also traces how the contemporary discussion about health and food lost significant ground to a new conversation about culinary taste and pleasure not just for elites but across the social spectrum. Fruitful interactions among literary and food cultures in Cinquecento Italy, most importantly, saw notions of taste/*gusto* gaining a central place in contemporary culture. Though as a result of reading what follows a melon or a sausage may never be the same, I hope these pages give readers a genuine taste for a literary tradition – and the pleasures it offers – too long overlooked.

29 See Ray, *Writing Gender*; Cox 'Female Voice'; Rosenthal, *Honest Courtesan*.



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