

THE FRUIT, HERBS & VEGETABLES OF ITALY (1614)

BY GIACOMO CASTELVETRO; TRANSLATED AND INTRODUCED BY GILLIAN RILEY (TOTNES: PROSPECT BOOKS, 2012).

Reviewed by Zachary Nowak, The Umbra Institute

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In 1614, Giacomo Castelvetro, native of Modena but for years in England in self-imposed exile, had a French scribe copy out three versions of his essay “*Brieve racconto di tutte le radici, di tutte le erbe et di tutti i frutti, che crudi o cotti in Italia si mangiano*” (A brief account of all the roots, of all the greens and of all the fruits, that raw or cooked one eats in Italy). This charming early modern account of Italian cuisine was half exhortation to the English to eat their veggies, and half an attempt at getting Castelvetro, then an older man, a pension from the Countess of Bedford so he could live out his years without having to teach Italian to European nobility. Both attempts were failures and Castelvetro’s manuscripts languished for centuries, known only to scholars until Gillian Riley’s translation in 1989. This volume is an updated edition and has much to commend it.

In addition to a short foreword by the late cookery writing great Jane Grigson, there is a long and very thorough introduction by Gillian Riley, also the text’s translator. Riley describes Castelvetro’s youth: after conversion to Protestantism, the young man led a peripatetic life with his uncle, also a convert. It was during these voyages that Castelvetro learned the art of simple meals simply prepared. We take this formula for granted as “Italian” now, but the cuisine of the upper classes in late-sixteenth-century Europe resembled that of the Middle Ages more than today’s fare. Spices were used in what now are unthinkable quantities, and vegetables were generally looked down upon as peasant food.

This is part of the charm of *The Fruits, Herbs & Vegetables of Italy*. While often mentioned in the same breath as the Italian culinary author Platina, Castelvetro does not share the former’s slavish devotion to citing the ancients and shoe-horning good food into the nutritional theory of the day. Indeed, Castelvetro’s essay has only a few references to food’s effect on one’s humors, and not a single classical citation. He organizes his book in four chapters (one for each of the four seasons) and lists, in rough order of chronological appearance, each of the seasons’ food products. The goal of the text is not to describe what is good for you, but simply what is good. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he describes how commoners prepare the fruits of the fields and gardens without turning up his nose in class-induced disdain.

Some of his entries are surprisingly similar to contemporary Italian cooking. Castelvetro’s indications on how to wash and dress salad properly are unconsciously followed by my Italian friends at every meal: “*Insalata ben salata/poco aceto e ben oliata*,” which Riley ably renders as “Salt the salad quite a lot/then generous oil put in the pot/and vinegar, but just a jot” (p. 58). Other foods remind the reader how much European food culture has changed: the book’s first

entry is for hops, and Castelvetro often lists verjuice (the juice of unripe grapes, a substitute for vinegar) in the recipes that dot the text. The reader should be aware, as Riley points out, that this is not a recipe book. Almost all of Castelvetro's culinary advice for these foods falls into three categories: cook in salted water and garnish, cook in broth and garnish with eggs or cheese, and roast in hot coals. There are variations on these themes, but simplicity of preparation is a virtue for Castelvetro.

The text should be of great interest to food historians and those interested in the transition from the obsession with heavily spiced dishes and artificiality as a goal to a simpler, more "natural" style of cooking popularized in France. This transition is usually dated to the late seventeenth century but Castelvetro seems to anticipate the shift towards dishes that exalt rather than hide natural flavors and tend to use oil rather than vinegar. While still influenced by the humoral system, he demonstrates a remarkably modern empiricism. Talking about how some people think that peaches are as unwholesome as they are delicious, he remarks:

For this reason some steep them in good wine, which is supposed to draw out the harmful qualities, though I think myself that they do this more out of gluttony than because of any real danger. Peaches certainly taste much better with wine, and I notice that nobody ever throws away the wine that they have soaked in, or comes to any harm from drinking it. (p. 86)

He also encourages the planting of lupins, a legume still eaten in Italy, as "a cheap way to enrich poor soil" (p. 66). What Castelvetro does *not* describe, though, is also fascinating. His final manuscript is from 1614, yet very few of the products of the Columbian exchange (the foodstuffs from the Americas introduced to Europe post-1492) appear in the text. While we do find a reference to the "Turkish bean" ("Turkish" at this time often indicated an exotic product, not necessarily one from Turkey), we do not find the tomato, bell or hot peppers, potatoes or maize. We do know that Castelvetro knew this last product, though, because he listed it in another manuscript, a "shopping list" of things to bring back from Italy for friends.

Another virtue of the text is its familiarity: Castelvetro prefigures another Italian cookbook writer, Pellegrino Artusi, in his avuncular style. In addition to instructions on how to select and prepare vegetables and fruits, the author frequently digresses to enliven the entries with personal stories. These include grafting a pear with the king of Denmark, learning to swim with hollowed-out squashes as flotation devices, and explaining to a confused German why Italian noblemen walk pigs on leashes (describing truffle hunting). Castelvetro does not shy away from being opinionated about good food, but he does so without being a prig. After describing a recipe for wild mushrooms cooked with oil, garlic, salt, herbs and verjuice, he announces that "Whoever eats them like this and doesn't lick their fingers does not, in my opinion, know much about true gastronomy" (p. 100). Castelvetro's occasional vitriol about "papists" and the Roman church, though a serious topic for him, amuses the reader as well.

In addition to a revised translation, one which Riley makes sparkle just like Castelvetro's original Italian, this new edition recommends itself with an extensive



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glossary at the end. Those of us unfamiliar with the agresto, grass peas, and sorb-apples are nonetheless able to fully understand—and therefore enjoy—Castelvetro’s treatise. In the age of sometimes mediocre book design, Prospect editor and publisher Tom Jaine has put together a beautiful volume as well, from its Galliard typeface (long the official font of Yale University) to its quality paper and elegant cover. The extensive index makes the book accessible to the browser or researcher. The only thing that a reader might have wished for is the much-mentioned “shopping list” that both Grigson and Riley refer to, perhaps as an appendix. This book is a window into the authentic Italian food of the past, without all the Mediterranean diet-inspired invention of tradition.

EATING THE ENLIGHTENMENT: FOOD AND THE SCIENCES IN PARIS, 1670–1760

BY E. C. SPARY (CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2012).

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When it comes to the history of food, eighteenth-century Europe is a rich reserve of resources that scholars have only begun to tap. The unprecedented influx of exotic comestibles from Asia and the Americas into Europe during this period has allowed scholars to measure class, gender and racial attitudes in the consumption of coffee, chocolate and sugar. The eighteenth century is also a critical time period for the study of food and sociability. Historians are finally beginning to take seriously the fact that the public sphere Jürgen Habermas described was produced in the course of meals; coffeehouses, cafés and restaurants were all new features of the Enlightenment. In these new public spaces, historians have argued, new types of social interaction were forged during the conspicuous consumption of food and drink.

We know considerably less, however, about food as a discrete category of formalized knowledge. This is no small oversight given that the classification of knowledge—manifested in things like Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* and Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopedie*—was so exigent to the idea of enlightenment in the first place. Nor have the following two centuries resolved the problem. While concrete boundaries have emerged in the fields of philosophy, history and anthropology, food studies remains in its disciplinary infancy. Nutritional science is only slightly ahead, evidenced by the fact that we continue today to debate the dietary efficacy of calorie counting and whether the doctor *truly* knows best. The unstable status of food as knowledge lies at the heart of Emma Spary’s *Eating the Enlightenment*.

In this ambitious and thought-provoking study, Spary illustrates how the most ordinary and mundane of human activities—eating—animated various discussions about the relationships among man, his stomach and his mind. As centers of knowledge production extended beyond the confines of universities to various public and private spaces, qualifying the types of information that counted as “learning”

An excerpt from *The Fruits, Herbs and Vegetables of Italy*, written by Giacomo Castelvetro in 1614. Fresh broad beans come next. We eat them at the end of the meal with a salty cheese from Crete or Sardinia, or failing that with Parmesan, and always with pepper. If there is no cheese, we just eat them with salt. For the sake of brevity I will say no more about the many singular virtues of this vegetable, except to mention one. Broad bean flour is excellent for clearing impurities in the skin, and our ladies, who are delicate and fastidious in all their ways, use it in the bath instead of nitre, for its lather cleans them as well as anything else. Before going any further I should say what I mean by "sweet herbs" since I shall use this expression quite often. Start by marking "Fruit, Herbs & Vegetables of Italy (1614)" as [Want to Read](#): [Want to Read](#) saving [Want to Read](#). Castelvetro takes us through the gardener's year, listing the fruit and vegetables as they come into season, with simple and elegant ways of preparing them. Practical instructions are interspersed with tender vignettes of his life in his native city of Modena. He writes of children learning to swim in the canals of the Brenta, strapped to huge dried pumpkins to keep them afloat. Castelvetro takes us through the gardener's year, listing the fruit and vegetables as they come into season, with simple and elegant ways of preparing them. Practical instructions are interspersed with tender vignettes of his

Publisher: Prospect Books ISBN 13: 9781903018644. Title: The Fruit, Herbs and Vegetables of Italy. Item Condition: New. Book Details. The book was written by the Italian refugee, educator and humanist Giacomo Castelvetro who had been saved from the clutches of the Inquisition in Venice by the English ambassador, Sir Dudley Carleton in 1611. When he came to England, he was horrified by our preference for large helpings of meat, masses of sugar and very little greenstuff. The Italians were both good gardeners, and had a familiarity with many varieties of vegetable and fruit that were as yet little known in England. He circulated his Italian manuscript among his supporters, dedicating it to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, herself a keen