

Please Play with Your Food

An Incomplete Survey of Culinary Wonders in Italian Renaissance Cookery

For Annette, my wonder of wonders

No one at the table will know what he is eating.

—Apicius, *De re coquinaria*, Campania, Italy, first century C.E.

WATER FROM STONE, manna from heaven, wine from water, five loaves and two fishes to feed a multitude: humankind has always been fascinated by miracles and wonders performed with food and drink—especially when the comestible and potable were produced out of seemingly inedible and undrinkable substances.

In what would become one of the most widely cited *topoi* of the Renaissance, Seneca the Younger (circa 3 B.C.E.–65 C.E.) encouraged his friend Lucilius to imitate others' works as a bee makes honey.¹ In the fourteenth century Petrarch would cite this same figure when he wrote to a young Boccaccio, "We must write just as the bees make honey...not keeping the flowers but turning them into a sweetness of our own, blending many very different flavors into one, which shall be unlike them all, and better."²

Not many years after Seneca exhorted his young friend to apiarian *imitatio*, the world would see the appearance of what was considered the first major work in Latin devoted exclusively to culinary formulas for changing raw ingredients into appetizing foods. Sometime during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, one of the world's earliest noted celebrity chefs, Apicius, a wealthy Roman merchant and gourmet, produced his *De re coquinaria*, in which he divulged some of the greatest recipes of Roman cookery.

Among these was a dish that would become a twentieth-century conundrum for scholars and cooks alike with the deceptively simple and simply deceptive appellation *Patina de apua sine apua* (Anchovy Casserole without Anchovies):

Finely chop enough roasted or boiled anchovies to fill a casserole dish of whatever size you like; take some pepper and little bit of rue; add a

sufficient amount of broth to cover and a little bit of olive oil and mix together in the casserole with the fish; then beat raw eggs and mix all the ingredients together in the casserole. Arrange sea nettles on top but do not mix them with the eggs. Cover the casserole, being careful that the nettles do not mix with the eggs, and when the liquid has evaporated, sprinkle with ground pepper and serve. No one at the table will know what he is eating.³

Some might read Apicius's now-legendary statement, "No one at the table will know what he is eating," as meaning that he was in some way trying to hide the taste of the anchovies (perhaps due also to the fact that the currently available translations of Apicius are minefields of misunderstanding; see note 1). But, as Karl Kraus once said famously, the closer you look at a text, the farther away it looks back at you: a more circumspect culinary and philological reading of this recipe reveals that there is more to it than meets the eye.

Like the famed anchovies found in southern Italy today, anchovies in Apicius's day were a prized delicacy, and there was no doubt that he was a purveyor of only the finest in fishes (legend holds that he once traveled to Tunisia from his native Campania merely to sample the giant shrimp there; unimpressed with their flavor, he was said to have left without ever setting foot on the African continent). Mind you: these were not salt-cured anchovies but fresh ones, like those in modern-day Sciacca, Sicily, stuffed with flat-leaf parsley and bread crumbs and then roasted or grilled.

It was more likely that Apicius meant something entirely different than what might be immediately intuited by the contemporary reader: so ingenious was his formula, as he put it ever so delicately, that the ingredients were totally transformed and the resulting flavor entirely distinct from the individual flavors of the said ingredients.

Like Seneca's honeybee, Apicius blended "many very different flavors into one...unlike them all, and better." He affected a seemingly miraculous transformation of food by means of a pseudoalchemic operation, transfiguring the ingredients into something entirely different from their organic state.

Some 1,400 years after Apicius, the tradition of faux foods in Italy would be reaffirmed when a scribe in the southern part of the Italic peninsula made a curious annotation to a cookery book in his possession. About halfway through a collection of recipes, where a series of quasi-magical, theatrical recipes begins, the scribe noted *incipiunt mirabilia gul[ae]* (here begin the wonders of culinary indulgence).

This book, currently in the illustrious collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City, was diligently transcribed, translated, and annotated by Terrence Scully in his critical edition of the codex, *The Neapolitan Recipe Collection*.⁴ As Scully rightfully pointed out in his introduction, this compilation of recipes belonged to a culinary tradition informed and shaped (and most probably founded) by Maestro Martino, the great Italian cook of the fifteenth century and author of what food historians have called the “first modern cookery book,” his *Liber de arte coquinaria* (Book on the Art of Cooking). Martino was chef to two of the greatest figures of fifteenth-century Italy: Cardinal Ludovico Trevisan, a key military commander for the Papacy, remembered by Renaissance chroniclers for his lavish banquets and culinary extravagance; and Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, the great Lombard *condottiere*. Martino’s cookery book (probably written around 1450) inspired a Latin adaptation of his recipes in one of the most popular and widely translated books of the Renaissance, Platina’s *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, as well as a counterfeit edition of his recipes attributed to Giovanni Rosselli, entitled *Epulario*, reprinted throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Italy. *The Neapolitan Recipe Collection* thus represented one of at least three manuscript traditions that sprung from Martino’s book.⁵

In each of the recipes that fell under the Neapolitan scribe’s rubric *mirabilia gulae*, a seemingly magical transformation was effected on the ingredients:

- How to Cook a Pigeon without Bones.
- How to Make Two Pigeons Out of One.
- How to Cook a Chicken in a Carafe.
- Dressed Peacocks That Seem to Be Alive;
 - and How to Make them Breathe Fire through Their Mouth.
- How to Make a Cow, a Calf or a Stag Look Alive.⁶

At least one of these recipes, How to Cook a Chicken in a Carafe, appeared frequently in Renaissance “books of secrets” that I consulted. Such books were akin to the recipe collections that began to appear in the second half of the fifteenth century in Italy, and they most probably preceded the culinary repertoires.⁷

The cookery book had yet to establish itself as a bona fide genre in the mid-fifteenth century: recipes were found primarily in books of formulas that included alchemic and medical remedies and household tips; occasionally, such tomes also included card and magic tricks as well as confidence games. During the last quarter of the fifteenth century, when printing began to flourish in Italy (where the first printed books appeared in 1470 in Venice and the Veneto), these books of secrets, which often included culinary formulas, were among the most popular.

Among the more entertaining magical dishes I came across in my perusing of Italian manuscripts were those found in one of the most significant books of secrets from this period, *De viribus quantitatis* (On the Virtues of Numbers), by mathematician and father of double-ledger accounting Luca Pacioli.⁸ This fascinating volume collected magic tricks, con-artist mathematical formulas, and genuine wonders of mathematics all together in the same manuscript.⁹

The following were sample “receipts” from the section devoted to miscellaneous secrets (my translation):

- How to Cook Eggs, Fish, or Meat in a Paper Pan.
- How to Kill a Squab by Hitting with a Feather on the Head.
- How to Make an Egg Walk over a Table.
- How to Make an Egg Slide up a Lance by Itself.
- How to Make a Cooked Chicken Jump on a Table.
- How to Eat Tallow and Spit Fire.
- How to Make Bran Turn Around in Water by Itself.
- How to Make an Egg Stand Up Straight on a Point without Any Other Aid.
- How to Make an Egg Float on Top of a Bucket Full of Water.
- How to Place an Egg in a Thin-Necked Carafe with its Shell.
- How to Place a Bunch of Grapes or a Peach in a Small Bottle.
- How to Preserve Fresh Fruit and Grapes for a Year.
- How to Make Worms Appear on Cooked Meat.

These were just a handful of the hundreds of secrets in Pacioli’s wonderful book, which was first shown to me by a private collector of rare books who specialized in magic. He contended adamantly that the Italians began to publish books on magic much earlier than did the French (who began to do so in the eighteenth century). He cited this book often as a sort of early summa of magic, even though Pacioli did not call it such.

The following were two “receipts” that appeared in Pacioli’s book (my translation):

- HOW TO MAKE A COOKED CHICKEN JUMP ON A TABLE
- Take some quicksilver and a little bit of magnetic powder, mix together and place in a well-sealed small bottle. And then put it inside a chicken



Pheasant Dressed in Its Own Plumage So That It Appears to Be Alive. Martino would have used a peacock to make this dish, one of the most popular at banquets in the Renaissance. The peacock was much more colorful than a pheasant, and Martino's contemporaries believed that consuming the internal organs of a peacock could enhance one's fortitude, spiritual and otherwise. The candied fruit is painted with gold dust, reminiscent of the gold leaf that Martino would have used to separate the skin and plumage from the flesh of the cooked bird.

FOOD STYLING: VICTORIA GRANOF; PHEASANT: OTTOMANELLI'S MEAT MARKET (GREENWICH VILLAGE, MANHATTAN); CANDIED FRUITS: SAHADI (COBBLE HILL, BROOKLYN); PREPARED IN THE KITCHENS OF CONVIVIUM OSTERIA (PARKSLOPE, BROOKLYN) BY VICTORIA GRANOF

or other cooked thing, which must be hot, and it will jump. And the same holds in a sink or pot, etc.

HOW TO MAKE WORMS APPEAR ON COOKED MEAT

Take some harp strings, or those from a lute, and roughly chop them, that is to say, in great lengths, just like natural worms, and put them in a bag. And when roasts or boiled meats are sent to the table on platters, you seed, as spices, these said strings that have been chopped, which, because the meats or chickens will be very hot, will slowly twist and they will appear to be worms and those that see them will get sick. And you, and your companions, will eat them as if they were whiskers, etc.

I found analogous recipes, from the same New York collection, in another book of secrets:

Excellent Card Games / game rules and memory techniques / with instructions for all those who play / Primero, Cartetta, and other games, / together with other amusing games / and unusual secrets for

the amusement and pleasure of every gentleman / Composed and published / by Horatio Galasso d'Arienzo / Printed in Venice 1593

The recipe below was just one of many typical recipes found in such books:

A SECRET FOR MAKING AN EGG WALK AROUND THE ROOM

Your Lordship must take an egg and make a hole in it on one end and the other. And by blowing through the hole, you must remove all that which is inside. Then take a cockroach and put it in the egg through one of the holes. And then you must stuff both the holes with white wax and then set it aside. Then, when you wish to perform this trick, call for an egg, but when the egg is brought forth, skillfully exchange the eggs. And then you must say, "I will make this egg walk around the room," and put it in the middle of the room, and place a candle near it, and the cockroach will begin to walk inside the eggshell and the egg will walk around the room.

The recipe *How to Cook Eggs, Fish, or Meat in a Paper Pan* found in Paciola also appeared in another one of the Martinian texts, the so-called Riva del Garda Manuscript, which contained a number of recipes that were added to Martino's core text by a scribe:

HOW ONE MUST COOK ON PAPER OR PARCHMENT

Mold the paper in a shape that resembles a pan, in such a way that the oil cannot escape; add enough oil so that it is half a finger above the paper; then heat this oil over hot coals or over a candle until very hot; then slowly break the egg and let it cook; allow for some salt to be added and make sure that the paper in which you have cooked the egg is not near the candle, that is to say, that it is not above it. This is done to cook it and to entertain.¹⁰

Maintaining yet another convention of cookery books that established itself with the Apician tradition,¹¹ the scribe of the Riva del Garda Manuscript concluded this recipe with a reflection on the recipe itself. He noted the seemingly secondary functional aspect of the recipe (to cook an egg) and drew attention to the primary purpose of the recipe—that of entertaining the onlookers.

Borrowing from the paradigm of the “triangle of desire” (first proposed by Sophocles and later perfected by René Girard), we can observe a similar structure in this recipe (as well as in the following recipes). For the recipe to be fulfilled, three elements are necessary: the ingredients (i.e., the “object”); the agent or the cook (i.e., the “subject”); and the onlooker or dinner guest (i.e., the “other”). Even from Apicius's claim that “no one at the table will know what he is eating,” we may infer that the fulfillment of the recipe would elicit a response of surprise and would result in an entertainment for those present.

This paradigm finds perhaps its greatest syntagmata through the secrets in the primary and most authoritative Martino manuscript, Library of Congress 153 (three of which I have translated here in their entirety):

HOW TO DRESS A PEACOCK WITH ALL ITS FEATHERS, SO THAT WHEN COOKED, IT APPEARS TO BE ALIVE AND SPEWS FIRE FROM ITS BEAK

How to dress a peacock so that it appears to be alive: first, the peacock should be killed by stabbing it in the head with a sharp knife or by slitting its throat, as you would with a baby goat. Then slice the body from the neck all the way to the tail, cutting only the skin and delicately skinning it so that you do not ruin the feathers or the skin. When you have finished skinning the body, turn the skin inside out, from the neck down. Make sure not to detach the head from the skin of the neck; and similarly, make sure that the legs remain attached to the skin of the

thighs. Then dress it well for roasting, and stuff it with good things and good spices, and take some whole cloves and use them to stud the breast, and cook the bird slowly on a spit; and place a wet cloth around the neck so that the heat does not overly dry it; and wet the cloth repeatedly. When it is done cooking, remove from the spit and dress it up in its skin.

Prepare an iron device attached to a cutting board that passes through the feet and legs of the peacock so that the iron cannot be seen and so that the peacock stands up on its feet with its head erect and seems to be alive; and arrange the tail nicely so that it forms its wheel.

If you want it to spew fire from its beak, take a quarter ounce of camphor with a little cotton wool around it, and put it in the beak of the peacock, and also put a little bit of aqua vitae or good, strong wine. When you serve it, light the cotton wool and it will spew fire for a good bit. And to make it even more magnificent, when the peacock is done, you can decorate it with leaves of hammered gold and place the peacock's skin over the gold after you have smeared the inside of the skin with good spices.

The same can be done with pheasants, cranes, geese, and other birds, as well as capons and pullets.

FLYING PIE

Make a mold for a large pie, and in the bottom make a hole large enough that your fist can pass through, or even bigger if you please, and the sides around it should be slightly higher than the common usage; fill it with flour and cook in an oven. Once it is cooked, open the hole on the bottom and remove the flour; beforehand, prepare another small pie filled with good stuff that has been well cooked and seasoned and that has been made as large as that hole in the large mold; place this pie through the hole into the mold; and in the empty space that remains around the small pie, put some live birds, as many as it will hold; and the said birds should be placed in it just before it is to be served; and when it is served before those seated at the banquet, you remove the cover above, and the little birds will fly away. This is done to entertain and amuse your company. And in order that they do not remain disappointed by this, cut the small pie up and serve. I say one pie, but you can make more—as many as you please. You can make tortes in a similar fashion, mixing the ingredients and adapting them in such a manner that they will go well together.

ASPIC IN A BASKET

Take a fine, well-prepared decoction and a basket or a small, new reed chest; neatly arrange pullets inside the basket, or other meat that you desire to place in the aspic, just as you would do on a platter; and take another, well-cleaned, and large pot, large enough to accommodate the basket, and place it inside, fill with the previously prepared decoction, and return to a cool place to thicken and congeal. When it has fully congealed, take a knife and heat slightly; run it around the basket in order to remove it more easily from the pot, and clean the basket all

around with white cloth or by some other means; you will be able to take the aspic in the basket wherever you wish, and similarly you can make the aspic in a cage if you like. And during Lent, you can make this using the same method, place a whole cooked fish inside; it will appear to be alive and it will be a fine thing to see.

In the first of these recipes, Martino delivered the most sophisticated version of the Promethean formula, whereby a seemingly “live” animal was served. A related recipe appears in Paciolini (How to Make a Cooked Chicken Jump on a Table), and the *Neapolitan Recipe Collection* also included this recipe. Moreover, the same technique for spitting fire appeared in Paciolini (How to Eat Tallow and Spit Fire). Of course, Martino’s application of the gold leaf (optional) was testament to his immeasurable superiority with respect to his contemporary recipe authors.

The Flying Pie recipe was as ingenious as it was simple, and Martino probably considered it supreme among culinary “secrets” because he placed it at the very end of his book. Pies—savory and sweet—were by far the most common preparation for a wide variety of foods during the Middle Ages and Renaissance (a perfect way to preserve meats, fruits, and vegetables), and thus, the serving of a “flying” pie would have certainly elicited the greatest surprise.¹²

The last recipe in this triad of secrets was a formula in which the fish not only “appear[ed] to be alive” but appeared to be swimming in a suspended aquarium. It fulfilled a Promethean ideal inasmuch as the fish is reanimated, but it also inverted the physical world by bringing what appeared to be a contained body of water onto land. We have to remember that vitreous technology was severely limited in the fifteenth century (it would take a few centuries for glass-making techniques to improve to the point of being able to contain sparkling wine). No one had ever seen an easily portable aquarium, so common in homes today. The sight of a seemingly live caged fish being brought to the table must have been literally amazing (consider also that the lighting was much weaker in those days and thus lent itself to the secret). Here, once again, Martino, like his predecessors and successors, commented at the end of the recipe: “it will be a fine thing to see.” This aspic could not be fulfilled unless there was a spectator to witness its presentation.

By arranging a fish in the gelatin, Martino offered one solution to what represented one of the greatest problems facing the cook during the Renaissance: “Lenten” days when the consumption of meat, eggs, or milk was not allowed. These included the forty days of Lent, every Friday, the vigils of the Assumption and of All Saints, as well as many other vigils.

Martino had collected or invented a wide array of formulas for dealing with the issue of fast days. And lest someone felt deprived on a fast day, he had devised a number of ingenious ways to create faux foods using rice and almond milk, among other ingredients. Among these, I have translated some of the more interesting recipes:

LENTEN IMITATION RICOTTA

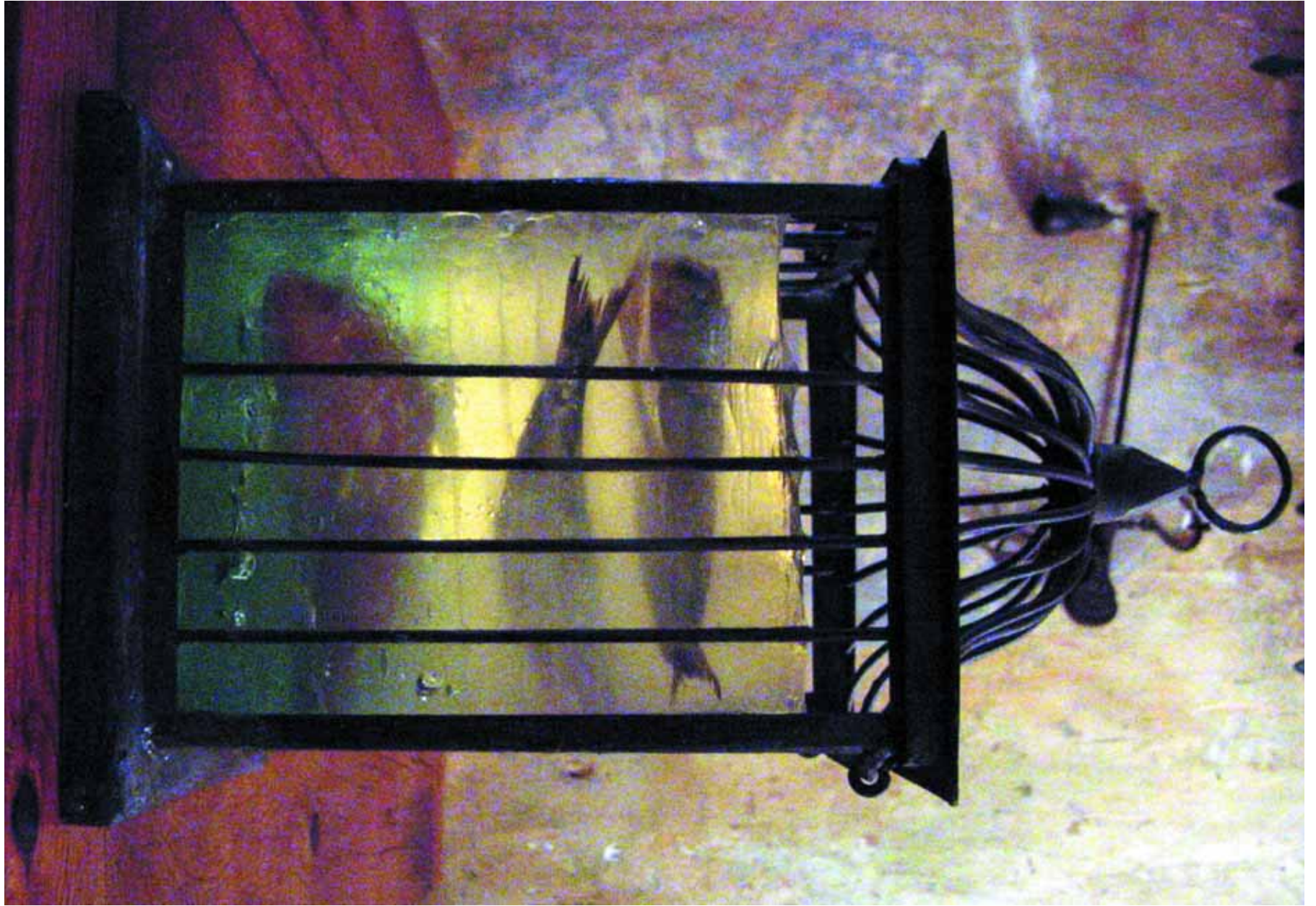
Take a libra¹³ of cleaned almonds that have been well crushed, just as above in the previous recipe, and get four ounces of sugar, an ounce of rose water, and a half cup of fish broth of equal quality as that mentioned above in the previous recipe. Once you have thinned all these things together, pass through a tight stamine.¹⁴ Place this mixture in a mold in a cool place during the evening until the morning. Then turn the molds out onto platters or cutting boards and serve this ricotta, but do not forget the sugar or anise, which will not hurt this dish.

LENTEN IMITATION BUTTER

Similarly, take a libra of cleaned, well-crushed almonds, as above, and pass through a stamine together with a half cup of rose water, until thick; and to make it properly thicken, add a little bit of powdered starch, or, even better, a half cup of pike broth with four ounces of sugar and a little bit of saffron to make it yellow, passing it all through a stamine, as I said, to make it as thick as you can. Then shape the butter like a loaf of bread; let it thicken from eve to morn in a cool place.

LENTEN IMITATION EGGS

Take some cleaned almonds that have been blanched as much as possible and crush well, moistening them with a little bit of rose water so that they do not purge their oil. Thin with cooled good, fatty, rich pike broth; pass through a stamine, turning it into milk; get a half libra of rice that has been cleaned and washed, or more or less, as needed; cook it well in half of the aforementioned almond milk, and also take three ounces of the best and whitest starch you can get, and add it to the remaining milk until you see that the starch is fully dissolved; then boil this milk and starch together for a half quarter of an hour, stirring continuously with a spoon, and make sure that it does not burn. Once this has been done, take the rice with all the milk and pass together through a stamine by the force of your hand; the thicker the mixture, the better it will be, and do not forget to add a generous amount of sugar. At your discretion, take the quantity or part of this mixture that you deem sufficient, make it yellow with saffron, and shape it into small round balls like egg yolks; then get two wooden molds made especially like eggs; and if you do not have the molds, you can use in their place, two egg shells; put the white mixture beneath and above and all around the egg yolks thus to make it look like eggs. And one by one, arrange them on a dish, and they will appear to be hard-boiled eggs that have been peeled. Thin and make liquid a little bit of the white composition with rose water and sugar, hot or cold as you please,



and you can use it to top the eggs and it will appear to be milk. If you like them dry, leave them as they are without topping with this liquid, but in its place top with fine, powdered sugar.

LENTEN ALMOND JUNKET

Get some cleaned, blanched almonds and crush well with a little bit of rose water so that they do not purge their oil. Then add two ounces of sugar and two ounces of rose water, and a quarter jug of good fish broth, which must be made from pike or tench because no other fish will be as good, whether from the sea or fresh water. Be careful that you do not make the broth too salty, but make sure that it is strong and that the fish is very fresh. Thin all of the aforementioned things together and put them in a stamine, passing them through and vigorously squeezing this mixture, so that none of the substance of the almonds is left in the stamine. Let this junket set overnight on a platter or other pot, and in the morning you will find that it has curdled and thickened in the same way a junket made of real milk does; and if you like, you can thicken with leaves or herbs the same way that other junkets are dressed, or you can leave on platters and top it in every way with sugar or candied anise.

In this quartet of Lenten dishes, almonds, fish, and fish stock worked miracles: cheese, butter, and eggs were magically created through anamorphic transformation using these simple ingredients. Here, image was everything. The strong flavors of fish and almonds did not re-create the flavors (nor the textures, for that matter) of eggs, cheese, and butter. But they created the visual illusion of those foods.

Even more remarkable was that these recipes associated fish and cheese—a powerful taboo in the cookery of Mediterranean Christendom. In modern day Italy cheese is almost never used to dress fish or seafood, and the mere idea of such a combination is repugnant to the Italian sensibility (just the thought of Scampi alla Parmigiana, a new-world take on an old old-world formula, is nauseating to Italians).

The origins of this culinary restriction are not entirely clear to food historians. It is generally believed that it derives from Christian adaptation of Jewish dietary laws. Even Maimonides had only conjecture to offer when he considered the origins of the milk and meat law in *kashrut*. He

Left: Live Fish Swimming in Aspic. In photographing this dish, we tried to use only candlelight. We discovered that the flickering made the fish look as though they were moving, and the reflections in the gelatin made the “water” appear to flow. The rustic cookware of Convivium Osteria added to the effect: a Renaissance culinary wonder reborn.

FOOD STYLING: VICTORIA GRANOF; PREPARED IN THE KITCHENS OF CONVIVIVUM OSTERIA (PARKSLOPE, BROOKLYN) BY VICTORIA GRANOF

speculated that the mixture of milk and meat was associated with idolatry and was thus to be avoided.¹⁵

The restriction in mixing fish and dairy was also practical: by never allowing contact, you ensured the purity of fish dishes on fasting days. Playing such tricks with food is a very powerful device. Go to any vegetarian food store and you will find “meatless” hamburgers, hotdogs, and sausages; go to any supermarket and you will find imitation butter and eggs; pick up any vegetarian cookbook and there will be a recipe for vegetarian chili. It is common for these foods to have cosmetic touches that make them look more like the food being imitated. In the same spirit that Martino used saffron to simulate the yellow of the egg yolk, the makers of vegetarian hamburgers impress and dye their patties with fake grill marks.

Oftentimes these faux recipes and faux foods are accompanied by claims (“They’ll never know it’s meatless!”) reminiscent of Apicius. There seems to be a subversive sense of delight in the creation and dissemination of these victuals. Such culinary *jouissance* is akin to the infantile pleasure of deviance—breaking the rules and transgressing cultural convention. As you gaze on the seemingly endless drawers of faux foods in supermarkets, you cannot help but sense the perverted joy of vegetarians who revel in eating hotdogs and hamburgers despite their renunciation of what they consider the barbaric customs of carnivores.

One of the most unforgettable instances of culinary anamorphism in recent memory must be attributed to famed restaurateur Abe Lebewohl, the late owner of the celebrated Second Avenue Deli in Manhattan, who was famous for his chop liver sculptures (he was also known for his Mock Chop Liver, a faux version of the old-world classic that wasn’t even vegetarian because it included schmaltz, i.e., chicken fat; it was just faux for the sake of being so).

According to the deli’s eponymous cook book,

In 1976, Abe donated 350 pounds of chopped liver—not for the bar mitzvah of an indigent thirteen-year-old, but to *New York* magazine designer Milton Glaser’s graphic-design studio, Pushpin. Working feverishly in their highly perishable medium (by its second day, the exhibit was deemed “ripe” for destruction), nineteen of the studio’s artists put together a show at Manhattan’s Greengrass Media Art Gallery called “Man and Liver.” Works included Bill Sloan’s *Barbra Streisand 1960—or Cry Me a Liver*, a sexy nude hen-woman by Robert Grossman, and an exquisitely sculpted rooster by Four Seasons chef Seppi Renggli. The winning entry was James Grashow’s monumental six-and-a-half-foot-high rendering of King Kong straddling the World Trade Center’s twin towers.¹⁶

Food in the form of buildings has been popular since the Renaissance. Perhaps, the most noted example in the Italian Renaissance involved Torrone, the famous nougat of Cremona. On the occasion of the wedding of Bianca Maria Visconti to Francesco Sforza, October 25, 1441, the bride and groom were presented with a nougat replica of the city's church bell tower, the so-called Torrione (today known as the Torrazzo) from which the sweet derived its name. Towers were a sign of power and wealth in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and it was not uncommon for gastronomic effigies to be erected in their likeness. The towers depicted by James Grashow were also a symbol of power, and like the tower of Cremona, they were a synecdoche for the city of New York. That the artist and restaurateur undertook such a labor-intensive rendering of the famous site from the New York skyline was testimony to the irresistible allure of culinary anamorphism.

There was perhaps only one instance of culinary anamorphism that could rival the chop liver Twin Towers. Made even more remarkable by its macabre nature and the fact that it was executed by one of the contemporary world's first universally recognized celebrity chefs, Auguste Escoffier, the bizarre episode was recounted by Timothy Shaw in his charming book on the life and times of the great French chef, *The World of Escoffier*, wherein he described many of the dishes inspired by famous personages of the era:

Another figure who inspired a recipe, though probably unwittingly, was the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen. He stayed at the Savoy in 1892, when he was in London to inform the Royal Geographical Society of his intention to reach the North Pole by allowing his ship, the *Fram*, to drift there after becoming locked in the ice. The *Fram* was specially constructed for the purpose: the expedition sailed in 1893 and returned to Oslo in 1896. Nansen had taken his idea from the of an earlier American expedition, led by Washington de Long, which had ended tragically in 1881: its ship, the *Jeannette*, broke up in the ice, and of three groups of survivors, one was rescued while all members of the other two perished in the cold. It was the wreckage of the *Jeannette*, drifting for years in the ice, which caught the creative imagination not only of Nansen, but also of Escoffier, to whom it suggested *Suprêmes de Volaille Jeannette*; a cold dish in which poached escalopes of chicken breast, decorated with tarragon and laid on layers of foie gras mousse and chicken jelly, were placed in a dish which was closely imprisoned within a sculpted block of ice so as to represent the ship held fatally by the drifting floes. The item was first served in June 1896 to celebrate Nansen's meeting with a British expedition. It was a Sunday night, there were three hundred people in the Savoy restaurant, and the *suprêmes* were a great success. It is only to be hoped that the *maitres d'hôtel*, explaining the story to

attentive clients, did not upset them by dwelling too long on the sufferings and deaths of most the *Jeannette's* crew!¹⁷

Of course, Escoffier was the leading figure of the culinary world of his era, and he had *carte blanche* to do whatever tickled his fancy. What Shaw seemed to overlook, however, was the fact that the *suprêmes* were, indeed, a success. The patrons of the Savoy were not affected by the morbid element of his invention. On the contrary, it would seem that the imagery enhanced rather than diminished their appetites. Although it would have been hard to gauge their exact reaction, one thing was clear: the fact that Escoffier had represented something using food superseded that which was represented; regardless of the signified (men suffering agonizing death), the act of signification and the signifier were enticing enough to appeal to the guests that night at the Savoy.

Whether the recipes in this essay appeal to our modern sensibility, the one thing that they seem to share is a sense of playfulness and wonderment: playfulness in their invention and wonderment in their reception. Whether it was the irony of Apicius's Anchovy Casserole without Anchovies or secret formulas for making chickens dance in esoteric books of secret knowledge; whether it was Martino's elaborate and highly refined presentations or his ingeniously conceived faux foods, conceived to entertain hedonist cardinals and ruthless *condottieri* of the Renaissance or to appease their desire for dairy and eggs on fasting days; whether it was Abe Lebewohl throwing away 350 pounds of chop liver for the amusement of a few artsy New Yorkers—each of these recipes appealed to the patron because the visual presentation of the food enhanced the experience of its consumption. In the case of Apicius, the visual presentation was a simple and harmless deception; in the case of Martino's living fish and peacock or Escoffier's drifting, doomed chicken escalopes, the representation was sophisticated and artful.

Yet all shared a ludic element that—at least in theory—improved the flavor of the dish. Therefore, please play with your food: it makes it taste better! 🍷

NOTES

1. *Epistolae morales ad Lucilium*, 84.
2. (Familiars 23.19).
3. The above translation is my own. Different translators have approached this recipe in different manners, some lacking a background in Latin, others experience in the kitchen. One of the greatest misunderstandings regarding the formula has arisen from a misreading of *sine* as *sive*. Gentleman and American restaurateur Joseph Vehling called it a "smelt pie" or "sprat custard." See his translation in *Cooking and Dining in Imperial Rome* (New York: Dover, 1977 [1936]), 100–101, where the translator's knowledge of cookery is golden but his competence in Latin lacking. See also the later and equally problematic translation in *The Roman Cookery Book*, translated by Barbara Flower and Elisabeth Rosenbaum (New

York: British Book Centre, 1958), 99, where mistranslation derived from a lack of competence in cookery; and the more recent rendering in *The Roman Cookery of Apicius*, translated by John Edwards (Washington: Hartley and Marks, 1984), 66–68, where the translator’s adaptation is faithful in spirit but not in letter.

4. Terence Scully, *The Neapolitan Recipe Collection* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 57. The original is found in ms. Bühler 19, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Literally, *mirabilia gull[a]e* means “wonders of the gullet,” but I have translated *gula* as “indulgence” in the sense of “felicitous” or “pardonable gluttony.” Scully translated this expression as “Wonders of Gourmandise” or “Gastronomical Marvels” (p. 128), the latter being closer, in my opinion, to the intended meaning of the expression. In English Renaissance cookery *mirabilia gulae* were called “subtleties,” although the term was generally used to denote figures (men or buildings) made out of sugar, like the Torrione mentioned below. Scully rightly noted that the scribe was probably not the main scribe of the manuscript but a scribe or owner of the manuscript who came into contact with it at a later point (Scully, pp. 128ff).

5. See Scully’s introduction to *The Neapolitan Recipe Collection*. My translation and annotated edition of the primary Martino ms. was published by the University of California Press in fall 2004. The corpus of recipes attributed to Martino (as well as many pseudo-Martinian recipes) was represented by five manuscripts—all of which were probably composed in peninsular Italy during the second half of the fifteenth century or the early sixteenth century. Of these, four were transcribed and published in recent years: Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Medieval Manuscript, n. 153; Biblioteca Apostolica, Vatican City, Rome, Manuscript Urbinate Latino, 1203; Archivio Storico, Riva del Garda (Trento), Italy, *Martino de Rubeis [ricettario]*; Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Manuscript Bühler 19. See Claudio Benporat’s *Cucina Italiana del Quattrocento* (Firenze: Olschki, 1996), where the Vatican, Riva del Garda, and Morgan manuscripts were reported; Emilio Facioli’s *L’Arte della Cucina in Italia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1992 [1987]), where the Library of Congress manuscript was transcribed. See also *The Neapolitan Recipe Collection*, translated and annotated by Terence Scully, and *Libro di cucina del Maestro Martino de Rossi* (Trento: Edizioni U.C.T., 1993), transcribed by Aldo Bertoluzza (the modern adaptation of the recipes and glossary was laden with gross errors but the photographic reproduction of the manuscript was highly valuable).

The fifth manuscript belongs to an unidentified private collection, and, unfortunately, no transcription is currently available to scholars. Although lacking a number of recipes found in both the Library of Congress and Vatican manuscripts, the Riva del Garda manuscript also contained a significant number of extravagant recipes: they were “extravagant” in the philological sense of the word, that is to say, they were not attributable to Martino but were part of the Martino tradition (“tradition,” also in the philological sense of the word) nonetheless. It was not uncommon for scribes to collect indiscriminately texts from other extraneous sources (in the same way that “extravagant” Petrarchan ballads, sonnets, and songs, composed by other poets, were often included by scribes in songbooks comprised mostly of Petrarchan compositions).

6. Scully’s translation.

7. David Westbury offered a brief discussion of the relation between cookery books and “books of secrets” in the introduction to his *Handlist of Italian Cookery Books* (Firenze: Olschki, 1963, q.v.).

8. Luca Pacioli (1445–1517) was a Franciscan friar and professor of mathematics at Perugia, Rome, Naples, Pisa, and Venice and a friend of Leonardo and author of many influential—if not entirely original or inspired—tractates on geometry and mathematics. The most famous of his works were *Summa de Arithmetica, Geometria, Proportioni, et Proportionalità* (1494) and *Divina Proportione* (1509).

9. Luca Pacioli, *De viribus quantitatis* (Milano: Ente Raccolta Vinciana, 1997).

10. Translation by the author. This recipe, along with the entirety of the Riva del Garda recipes, appeared in an appendix to my translation of Martino’s *The Art of Cooking*.

11. A copy of Apicius’s book began to circulate among humanists as early as 1417 when Florentine Poggio Bracciolini saw a copy of it at the monastery of Fulda, Germany. The cookery books of both Martino and Platina (Bartolomeo Scappi, *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, first printed in 1475) were based—in format and to some extent in style—on Apicius’s book.

12. Could this recipe be the remote inspiration of the nursery rhyme “Sing a song of sixpence”? “When the pie was opened / the birds began to sing / was that not a tasty dish / to set before a king?”

13. Roughly 12 modern ounces.

14. Precursor of muslin cloth, used for straining liquids, a fundamental technique in medieval and Renaissance cookery.

15. Maimonides wrote: “Meat boiled in milk is undoubtedly gross food, and makes overfull; but I think that most probably it is also prohibited because it is somehow connected with idolatry, forming perhaps part of the service, or being used on some festival of the heathen. I find a support for this view in the circumstance that the Law mentions the prohibition twice after the commandment given concerning the festivals “Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord God” (Exod. xxiii. 17, and xxxiv. 23), as if to say, ‘When you come before me on your festivals, do not seethe your food in the manner as the heathen used to do.’ This I consider as the best reason for the prohibition.” Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Dover, 1956), 371.

16. Sharon Lebewohl and Rena Bulkin, *The Second Avenue Deli Cookbook* (New York: Villard, 1999), 4.

17. *The World of Escoffier* (New York: Vendome, 1995), 120–121.

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