

Italian Renaissance Food-Fashioning or the Triumph of Greens

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Along with clothes, manners, and ways of speaking, nutritional habits and food preferences in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were relevant indicators of social standing, economic status, and cultural identity broadly conceived. Two very different canvases, one depicting the poor and unrefined peasant eating a dish of beans (1583-1584) by Annibale Carracci and the other of the sumptuous banquet of the *Wedding at Cana* (1562-1563) by Paolo Veronese may capture artistically two ends of the spectrum of the early modern Italian relationship between food and social standing. Well before the figurative arts illustrated these extremes, however, medieval recipe collections and nutritional and medical treatises on food relying heavily on Greek and Latin sources conveyed prescriptive norms and moral imperatives on what and how to eat according to class, gender, age, religion, and even national identity.¹

Fifteenth-century regimens, mainly based on ancient physiological theory, presented an essential dichotomy between workers and leisured classes. According to this theory, only workers could tolerate “heavy” food such as beans, leeks, onions, and lentils, which could be easily digested by their body’s heat, while leisured people should nourish themselves primarily with more delicate foods. In sixteenth-century dietary tracts and recipe books, the dichotomy persisted but the focus on social class and prescriptions became more and more specific.² *Trattato de’ cibi et del bere*,³ the 1583 book by Bolognese physician Baldassare Pisanelli, represents a sort of bridge between the attention still given to physiological theory and that paid to the class connotations of food. While according to the ancient physiologists, a “low” food could provide adequate sustenance for people doing heavy work, for Pisanelli and other later physicians and theorists, those foods were crude in nature and poor in nourishment and were best eaten only by poor people who lacked the means to provide themselves with more nutritious fare.⁴ Birds, wildfowl, and fish, the most delicate and “light” of foods, were reserved, however, for noble and sedentary people, who did not need to do physical labor. In sum, an ideology of *Renaissance food-fashioning* dictated that people had to eat according to who they were, which meant where they stood on the social ladder. Literature, in turn incorporated these assumptions and depicted a society where what people ate represented a meaningful and appropriate confirmation of their social position.⁵

¹ On the dietetic literature of the early modern period in Europe, see Ken Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002) and Marilyn Nicoud, *Les régimes de santé au Moyen Âge. Naissance et diffusion d’une écriture médicale, XIIIe-XVe siècle*, 2 vols. (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2007).

² Albala, *Eating Right*, 187-90.

³ *Trattato de’ cibi, et del bere del Signor Baldassar Pisanelli medico Bolognese, ove non solo si tratta delle virtù de’ cibi, che ordinariamente si mangiano, & de’ vini che si bevono, ma insieme s’insegna . . .* (Carmagnola: Marc’ Antonio Bellone, 1589).

⁴ Pisanelli, *Trattato della natura de’ cibi*: “I fagioli, essendo di mal nutrimento alle persone delicate, si devono lasciare alle genti di lavoro, e di campagna . . . [“Beans, not being well-suited to nourish delicate people, should be left to workers and peasants . . .”], 134.

⁵ A group of genre paintings by Vincenzo Campi, Bartolomeo Passarotti, and Annibale Carracci produced around the 1580s juxtaposes figures of peasants and rural workers with foodstuffs. For the intricate connection between the Northern Italian genre scene, notions about food, social order, sexuality, and low-born bodies, see the study by

A fifteenth-century novella by Sabadino degli Arienti relates the *beffa* played by the Marchese Nicolò III d'Este on his *cameriere* Bondeno, a son of a peasant, who asks to be made a *cavaliere*. The Marchese refuses his request because Bondeno has not demonstrated the *virtù* required of a *cavaliere*, but he promises nonetheless to give his *cameriere* a coat of arms. When the Marchese presents Bondeno with his coat of arms to the knowing laughter of the whole court, Bondeno sees that at its center instead of the noble eagle he had hoped for there is figured a humble head of garlic. As Nicolò explains to the peasant-descendent, Bondeno must first digest his garlic before seeking any other honor. The underlying message is that Bondeno will be a peasant “come l’aglio che sempre è cibo rusticano, quantunque alla volte artificiosamente civile se faza ponendose nel corpo de li arostiti pavari,” at least until he transcends (or digest) his antecedents as a garlic eater.⁶ As this novella suggests, a complex ideology regarding certain types of food, as well as their imagined properties and social connotations was common fare in the culture of the Italian Renaissance.

The origins of this vision can be traced back to the medieval conception of the Great Chain of Being, which reproduced the four Aristotelian elements in an ascendant fashion, going from the lowest, earth, through water and air to the highest, fire, and classified different kinds of foods as being more or less closely aligned with each element. But, this hierarchy of elements was also repeated in the social and nutritional hierarchy. Thus, people at the base of society were to eat the most basic, earthbound foods, such as vegetables, greens, legumes, and herbs, while the most noble should primarily eat foods with no evident links to the soil.⁷ Conceptions of food in the Renaissance were also still influenced by the humoral-Galenic theory, which enjoyed a “revival” in the humanistic culture of the fifteenth century. According to this theory, to keep in balance the different “humors” of the body, a good diet had to be the result of foods balancing the moist/water and the dry/air, the warm/fire and the cold/earth, recalling again the four Aristotelian elements.⁸ These prescriptions were tirelessly repeated by authors throughout Italy, the Mediterranean, and Europe in general, from the fifteenth well into the sixteenth century, with only minimal variations. Most of them also insisted on the dangers of eating vegetables, salads, and fruit, as these were thought to be responsible for creating putrefaction in the stomach. It seems probable that this negative judgment derived mainly from the association of vegetables with the peasant diet or with the “lowest” form of nutrition, as we have seen well illustrated in Arienti’s fifteenth-century *novella*. But, one needs to ask just how hegemonic and determinant was this medical, philosophical, and social *food-fashioning* for Renaissance Italy?⁹

Sheila Mc Tighe, “Foods and the Body in Italian Genre Paintings, about 1580: Campi, Passarotti, Carracci,” *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 86. 2 (2004): 301-23. I would like to thank Fredrika Jacobs and John Paoletti for pointing out this important study.

⁶ “[J]ust as garlic will always be a rustic food even if it is sometimes artfully civilized by using it to fatten roasted geese.” Sabadino degli Arienti, *Le Porretane*, ed. Bruno Basile (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1981), *novella* xxvii, 238-44 (243). Arienti’s novella is analyzed in a seminal article by Allen J. Grieco that studies the connection between vegetables, low social order, and the Great Chain of Being; see Allen J. Grieco, “The Social Politics of Pre-Linnaean Botanical Classification,” *I Tatti Studies. Essays in the Renaissance* 4 (1991): 131-49 (132).

⁷ Allen J. Grieco, “Food and Social Classes in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy,” in *Food: A Culinary History*, eds. Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 302-12.

⁸ These humoral physiological theories can be traced back to Hippocrates and Galen and greatly influenced how Renaissance physicians and medical writers evaluated food. See chapter 2 “The Human Body,” in Albala, *Eating Right*.

⁹ The expression *Renaissance food-fashioning* is a playful takeoff on Stephen Greenblatt’s notion of Renaissance self-fashioning. In this article, it refers to the fact that discourses of food – such as the one on vegetables and their low position in the food hierarchy – were fashioned also as social and cultural discourses with implications well

In fact, food historians have demonstrated that the Galenic discourse of food in dietary tracts had only a minor role in shaping lived experience and food practice in early modern Italy. What one ate was often much more the result of one's economic position in society, the availability of certain food, the limits of Mediterranean climate, and local agricultural possibilities.¹⁰ Salad and green vegetables had long occupied a central position in the agricultural and market landscape of Italy and the Mediterranean,¹¹ and vegetables were featured also in upper-class cuisine, although in general for elites in the Middle Ages, the perfect meal centered on meat, ideally fresh meat, obtained through hunting. With the rise of urban centers and a new class of city dwellers in Renaissance Italy, game (but not fresh meat) lost its preeminence among the upper classes, while a higher consumption of all sorts of vegetables became the norm for a wide range of society as attested to by their regular appearance in menus and recipe collections written for diverse social groups.¹² Food historians have discussed in detail this transition in the eating habits of Mediterranean populations and especially Italians and the increasing appreciation for green vegetables and salads in the period. Even European travelers from northern Europe and England began to express an admiration for the diversified Italian agricultural landscape and, at the same time, a fear of the presumed danger of eating too many vegetables and too much fruit while in Italy.¹³

beyond a simple dietary advice. Thus, discourses of food were fashioned by and helped fashion discourses of class, politics, and culture. As these discourses could change in time, so the perception of a certain food could also change. Renaissance food-fashioning thus does not imply necessarily that people could mold themselves through food, even though some people clearly attempted to do so, but instead that changing discourses of food in the renaissance contributed in meaningful and often surprising ways to fashioning and refashioning discourses of class, social hierarchy and cultural standing.

¹⁰ On this point, see the fundamental *Histoire de l'alimentation*, eds. Jean Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari (Paris: Fayard, 1996) and Massimo Montanari, *La fame e l'abbondanza. Storia dell'alimentazione in Europa* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1993).

¹¹ See, for instance, the several beautiful images of herbs, vegetables (including lettuce), flowers, and fruit and their cultivation that appear in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century editions of the *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, a wellness and health handbook. See *The Medieval Health Handbook Tacuinum Sanitatis*, ed. Luisa Cogliati Arano, translated and adapted by Oscar Ratti and Adele Westbrook from the original Italian edition (New York: George Braziller, 1976).

¹² Martino da Como (perhaps the most-noted cook of the fifteenth century) in his *Libro de arte coquinaria* and Bartolomeo Sacchi known as Platina (who translated into Latin most of Martino's recipes in his *De honesta voluptate and valetudine*) both include in their recipe collections a great number of vegetarian dishes. See Martino da Como, *Libro de arte coquinaria. Copia anastatica dell'incunabolo stampato a Cividale da Gerardo di Fianandra nel 1480 e conservato al Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cividale del Friuli* (Udine: Società Filologica Friulana e Arti Grafiche Friulane, 1994). For an English translation see *The Art of Cooking: The First Modern Cookery Book Composed by the Eminent Maestro Martino da Como, a Most Prudent Expert in this Art, once Cook to the Most Reverend Cardinal Trevisan, Patriarch of Aquileia*, ed. with an introduction by Luigi Ballerini, trans. and annotated by Jeremy Parzen & with Fifty Modernized Recipes by Stefania Barzini (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005). For an Italian edition of Platina's work, see *Bartolomeo Platina. il piacere onesto e la buona salute*, ed. Emilio Faccioli (Turin: Einaudi, 1985); for an English edition see: *Platina: On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, ed. and translated by Mary Ella Milham (Tempe, Arizona: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1998).

¹³ In 1562, the tutor of William's Cecil's son, who was about to leave for Italy, expressed his concern to the youth's father that Mr. Thomas might fall sick because of the heat he would encounter and the dangers of eating too much raw fruit. See Thomas Olsen, "Poisoned Figs and Italian Sallets: Nation, Diet and the Early Modern English Traveler," in *Annali d'italianistica*, ed. Luigi Monga, vol. 21 (2003): 233-54 (236). The English traveler Robert Dallington at the end of the sixteenth century writes about the commonness of vegetable cultivation and usage in Italy: "Concerning herbage, I shall not need to speake, but that it is the most general food of the Tuscan, at whose table Sallet is as ordinary, as salt at ours; for being eaten of all sorts of persons and at all times . . ." Robert

The cultural stigma attached to foods like vegetables and especially raw greens such as salad remained quite vivid in northern Europe; in fact, a number of Italian writers of the period report the “foreign” opinion that raw greens are a food fit for animals, not for humans.¹⁴ These assumptions were reproduced in literature of different genres, at times in quite exaggerated or chauvinistic pronouncements. For instance, English theatre almost invariably represented Italian figs, “sallets” (salads), and melons as dangerous, alien foods. An interesting example is found in John Webster’s 1612 tragedy *The White Devil*, set in Italy, where the secretary Flamineo reveals to the public his fear that his short-tempered master, the Duke of Bracciano, sooner or later will have him killed by feeding him an Italian salad or a Spanish fig.¹⁵ In Thomas Coryate’s *Crudities*, the author’s narrative of his travels to France and Italy and other parts of continental Europe is aptly represented by “the book’s main imaginative figure, ‘crudities,’” a clever way to recall Coryate’s undigested experiences along with his consumption of dangerously raw foods.¹⁶ Apparently, at least for the English cultural scene, the prejudice surrounding vegetables in general, and some vegetables in particular, fueled assumptions about the superiority of the English people’s eating habits, their love for meat dishes, and the unexpressed association of Italian vegetables with corruption and treachery, in politics as well as in food.¹⁷

While prescriptive literature, dietary tracts, and medical and scientific manuals published during the sixteenth century in Europe slowly began to register a new appreciation of green vegetables and greens, a wide range of literary works in Italy picked up this theme and contributed to a changing, more positive perception of leafy foods. The literary imagination interacted with and played a significant role in this changing view of an ongoing debate on vegetables and greens. A closer look at literary texts indeed reveals a significant new range of sources and a slightly different methodological perspective for the study of the culture and history of food in the period.¹⁸

Although the dividing line between medical or prescriptive works on food and literary texts was not a hard and fast one in the pre-disciplinary days of the early modern period, I would like to begin my analysis by looking at two works on the cusp of that apparent divide: two treatises on herbs written between the second half of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century notable for their everyday language, their vivid representations, their caution in proposing traditional medical clichés, and the weight given to personal experience. The first, heroic defense of salad found an authoritative voice in mid-sixteenth century in Costanzo Felici (1525?-1585), a botanist and doctor of medicine from the Marche region in central Italy. In 1565,

Dal[l]intgon, *A Survey of the Great Dukes State of Tuscany* (London: Edward Blout, 1605), 34; quoted in *The Art of Cooking*, ed. Ballerini, 15.

¹⁴ The common opinion is quoted by Costanzo Felici da Piobbico in his letter on vegetables to Ulisse Aldovrandi “[. . .] piacendo a voi tanto il cibo dell’insalata così detta, vulgare cibo quasi proprio (come dicono oltra montani) de’ Italiani ghiotti *quali hanno tolta la vivanda agli animali quali si mangiano l’erbe crude*. [. . . as you like so much what is called salad, a common food typical – as the Germans say – to gluttonous Italians *who have stolen the feed of animals that eat crude greens*].” See Costanzo Felici da Piobbico, *Lettera sulle insalate. Lectio nona de fungis*, eds. Guido Arbizzoni, Delio Bischì, Giorgio Nonni, Piera Scaramella Petri (Urbino: Accademia Raffaello, 1996), 67. [Italics mine.]

¹⁵ Quoted in Olsen, “Poisoned Figs and Italian Sallets,” 235. For an edition of Coryate’s *Crudities* see: Thomas Coryate, *Coryate’s Crudities* (1611), 2 vols; [reprint: Glasgow: J. McLehose; New York: MacMillan, 1905].

¹⁶ Olsen, “Poisoned Figs and Italian Sallets,” 236.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁸ As an excellent example of a model study that melds together historical documents, texts of literature, and works of art, see *Il cibo e le donne nella cultura e nella storia. Prospettive interdisciplinari*, eds. Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli and Lucia Re (Bologna: Clueb, 2005), especially the critical introduction.

Felici responded to a request by his friend, the scientist Ulisse Aldovrandi. Passionate for all sorts of salads, Aldovrandi had asked Felici to list and discuss all the herbs that could be eaten raw or cooked. After a preamble that plays with humor on the difficulty of such a complex subject, Felici stresses more seriously that talking about food means talking about specific cultural and geographic identities. Appearing to distance himself from national chauvinism, he first explains to Aldovrandi how the same food can be considered poison in one country and good to eat in another. But on one thing, Felici claims triumphantly, everybody can agree:

che l'insalata è nome de' Italiani solamente, avendo la denominatione da una parte del suo condimento, cioè dal sale, però che si chiama così un'erba, o più miste insieme, o altra cosa con condimento d'olio e sale . . .¹⁹

This little tract titled *Lettera sulle insalate e piante che in qualunque modo vengono per cibo all'uomo* adopts a language free of scientific jargon and reverses the traditional negative judgment of its time on vegetables, greens, and fruit. It also presents in a positive manner the everyday practice of raising fruits and vegetables and stresses direct observation of the growing of same, a decidedly non-aristocratic point of view. The essay is not preoccupied with rational classification or theoretical subdivisions of the subject; its main thrust is narrative, where personal digressions, actual observations, popular proverbs, and medical advice go hand in hand with gastronomy, attention to taste, descriptions of color, and odor of plants, all seasoned with irony and humor. If ancient *auctoritates* are quoted from time to time, it is always *cum grano salis*.²⁰ Felici's discourse was certainly interested in counteracting – through experience – the presupposition that consuming raw food was a sign of a bestial or backward nation,²¹ where humans ate what was appropriate only for beasts. Clearly Felici, as well as many Italians of the day, would not have subscribed to Levi-Strauss' famous analysis and interpretation of the raw and the cooked as corresponding to a certain degree of civilization, but this is not the main thrust of his narrative, which focuses literally on the Italian culture of salad. According to Felici, salads could be eaten raw or cooked, and they could be mixed with meat and fish for the creation of delightful, attractive, and sophisticated meals. The *Lettera sulle insalate* is, in fact, a gastronomical treatise as well as a literary composition that alternates descriptions of edible plants with advice on how to cook or prepare them according to season and individual taste and that celebrates the superiority of the culture that has and deploys such knowledge and good taste.

Giacomo Castelvetro (1546-1616?), an Italian exile living in England after having escaped the Roman Inquisition, was interested in many of the same themes a little more than a generation later. In 1614, he wrote in Italian his quasi-poetic tribute to Italian vegetables entitled *Racconto di tutte le radici, di tutte l'erbe, et di tutti i frutti, che crudi o cotti in Italia se mangiano*.²²

¹⁹ "Salad is a name invented solely by Italians, and it comes from salt, a part of its dressing; thus every raw green or a mixture of raw greens or something else dressed with oil and salt is called salad." Costanzo Felici da Piobbico, *Lettera sulle insalate*, 68.

²⁰ Felici quotes Martiale (*Epigrame*) to discuss the beet and its greens, but then he adds: "E con questo medemo accenna sia ancora un cibo da gente vile, *ma per la varietà del suo condimento si è trovato cibo grato a tutte le tavole*. [And with this he means that it is still a food for low people *but because of the variety of its dressing it has become a food appreciated on every table*.]" Costanzo Felici, *Lettera sulle insalate*, 94. [Italics mine.]

²¹ See note 14.

²² See Luigi Firpo, *Gastronomia del rinascimento* (Turin: Utet, 1974), 131-76 and Giacomo Castelvetro, *Racconto di tutte le radici, di tutte l'erbe, et di tutti i frutti, che crudi o cotti in Italia se mangiano* (London: 1614). The entire text is available at www.liberliber.it For an English translation, see Giacomo Castelvetro, *The Fruit, Herbs &*

Clearly a direct response to the English writers who condemned salad and vegetables as dangerous Italian novelties and temptations, Castelvetro's work reviewed with longing the great variety of fruit and vegetables produced in Italy in all four seasons. As a guest of a carnivorous country, Castelvetro responded to the fears of his English hosts by recalling from Felici the old Italian proverb on how to make a good salad, which he labeled the *legge insalatesca* (the salad law): "insalata ben salata, poco aceto e ben oliata."²³ He also explained for his readers how to wash with care and dress with a little vinegar and abundant oil and salt a dish of salad, and he reassured them that this was loved not only in Italy by the poor but significantly by the rich as well.

Castelvetro's *Racconto* aimed at redressing the bad reputation suffered by salads and vegetables in England, illustrating their intrinsic goodness and healthiness, while at the same time making use of them to represent symbolically his home country as a paradise lost; thus issues of cultural and national identity run through his *racconto*. When he explains how it is better to use a knife and fork to mix a dressed salad properly, the example serves to stigmatize, as he makes clear, the Germans and other foreign people who not only ate with their fingers but were not even able to arrange their salad on a plate and had no idea of how to dress it with the right proportions of salt, vinegar, and oil. Castelvetro concludes this section noting with pride that Italians give much more attention to taste than other foreign populations.²⁴ The *racconto* is punctuated with short anecdotes that range from the gastronomical to the comical, the medical to the botanical, which are virtually always accompanied by observations on the importance of taste. Traditional theories of the four humors and of a hierarchy of foods do occasionally make an appearance, but they are related as if they were a given, a background, an expected part of the common culture that his prospective readers would know and share. In the end, however, it was the colorful image of Italian vegetables, raw and cooked, that came to represent for the exile Castelvetro, *letterato* and humanist, his own country and his own cultural identity.

By the time that Castelvetro published his work in 1627, the image and perception of raw vegetables and salad had changed greatly, especially in Italy. New social and economic elites in the sixteenth century had already begun to consider the consumption of vegetables, and especially greens, as a sign of distinction.²⁵ While a more observation- and experience-oriented botany and science played a major role in this changing perception, imaginative literature

Vegetables of Italy, an Offering to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, translated with an Introduction by Gillian Riley (London: Viking, British Museum Natural History, 1989).

²³ "A salad must be well salted with little vinegar and plenty of oil." Castelvetro, *Racconto di tutte le radici*, 7 and Costanzo Felici, *Lettera sulle insalate*, 69.

²⁴ ". . . e non fare come i Tedeschi e altre straniere generazioni fanno, li quali, appresso avere un po' poco l'erbe lavate, in un mucchio le mettono nel piatto e su vi gittano un poco di sale e non molto olio, ma molto aceto, senza mai rivolgerla, non avendo eglino altra mira che di piacere all'occhio; ma noi Italici abbiam più riguardo di piacere a monna bocca. [Never do as the Germans and others nations do - who as soon as they have washed the salad a little, throw it in a pile on the plate and splash on a little salt and almost no oil, but way too much vinegar without ever mixing it together. And all this is done only for looks, while we Italians would much rather please the palate.]" Castelvetro, *Racconto di tutte le radici*, 7.

²⁵ A sign of the widespread use and consumption of raw greens in Italy: in 1627, the physician Salvatore Massonio published *Archidipno ovvero dell'insalata e dell'uso di essa*, a treatise that reviewed all types of greens that could be served at the beginning or the end of a meal. [Salvatore Massonio, *Archidipno ovvero dell'insalata e dell'uso di essa*, eds. Maria Paleari Henssler and Carlo Scipione Ferrero (Milan: EDI.ARTES, 1990)] As Albala has aptly summarized, in Massonio's treatise, "the projected audience became the ordinary household, and dietary recommendations were forced to take into account ordinary eating habits, often entirely bypassing the ancient authorities." Albala, *Eating Right*, 43. See also the discussion at pages 265-66.

contributed to it as well, using the image of salad as a metaphor embedded with different and unexpected meanings. It is well known that humanists such as Marsilio Ficino and Erasmus, as well as artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, favored a vegetarian diet in accordance with the precepts of classical cultures revived in the Neoplatonic movement. Ficino appreciated a vegetarian diet because of its purported beneficial effects on the mind; in sum, it was a diet good for intellectuals. But their insistence on frugality and asceticism had little in common with a newer appreciation of vegetables, portrayed with increasing frequency in the literature of the time as a sign of refined manners, renewed attention to taste and bodily pleasure, and ultimately even a sign of cultural and social elevation.²⁶

Certainly a vegetarian program was not in the mind of Pietro Aretino when he wrote about vegetables in his letters or other works. Far from being either a raw food appropriate for uncouth people or a dish apt to refine and clarify the mind, salad makes an appearance quite early in the first day of his *Ragionamento* (1534) when the main character Nanna teaches her daughter Pippa the *arte puttanesca* (*art of whoring*). Well-mannered and educated behavior at the table was a crucial component, not only in the education of the perfect courtier, but also in that of the aspiring courtesan, and salad was already a regular part of the tables of the rich. Nanna, anticipating some of the preoccupations later expressed by Castelvetro, recommends to her daughter Pippa:

Venendo la insalata, non te le avventare come le vacche al fieno: ma fà i boccon piccin piccini, e senza ungerti appena le dita pónitigli in bocca; la quale non chinari, pigliando le vivande, fino in sul piatto come talor veggo fare ad alcuna poltrona . . .²⁷

Though Pippa is not destined to be a refined cortigiana such as Veronica Franco, she still must learn how to eat a salad with grace and composure, even with a certain *castiglionesca sprezzatura*. The act of eating salad in a refined and elegant manner is linked in this text by Aretino to Pippa's self-fashioning as an attractive, sexually appealing woman capable of fitting into upper-class society.²⁸

Later, when speaking about her life as a prostitute, Nanna returns again to salads, using them in a popular sense as an erotic metaphor when she recalls the details of her love with a sugar

²⁶ See Marsilio Ficino, *De vita libri tres*, where he writes on what an intellectual should or should not eat to maintain his health. On Renaissance vegetarianism and its relationship to writers/intellectuals, see Michel Jeanneret, "Ma salade et ma muse," in *Metaphorical and Material Cultures of Food in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Timothy J. Tomasik and Julian M. Vitullo (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 211-20.

²⁷ "And when you reach the salad, don't dive in like a cow into clover; but bite off tiny mouthfuls without smearing the tips of your fingers with oil, and carry them to your mouth, which you should not lower to lap the food off the plate, as I have so often seen certain wenches do." [Aretino's *Dialogues*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972), 170]. See "Dialogo di Messer Pietro Aretino nel quale la Nanna il primo giorno insegna a la Pippa sua figliuola a esser puttana," in Pietro Aretino, *Pietro Aretino Dialoghi*, ed. Guido Davico Bonino, 2 vols. (Milan: ES, 1997), 2: 15-97 (21).

²⁸ In the second day of the dialogue between Nanna and Antonia, salad as a food is considered among the "gentilezze" or things noble to eat: "insalate, una nidiata di uccellini, un mazzetto di fragole o simili gentilezze . . . [salad greens, a nest of birds, a bunch of strawberries, or suchlike delicacies . . .] " "La seconda giornata del capriccio Aretino nella quale la Nanna narra alla Antonia la vita delle maritate," in *Pietro Aretino Dialoghi*, ed. Davico Bonino, 1: 103-56 (123). [English translation from Rosenthal, *Aretino's Dialogues*, 76.]

merchant: “E mentre durò l’amorazzo suo, fino *nella insalata mettevamo il zucchero* . . .”²⁹ Aretino’s erotic play with the concept of the salad was quickly picked up and imitated in other literary texts. In 1535, the humanist poet Francesco Maria Molza (1489-1544), member of the poetic academy of the Vignaiuoli, dedicated to salad, its history and etymology, a long and playful poem imbued with sexual and erotic meanings.³⁰ The aesthetic appearance of a fresh salad in a round dish (*il tondo*) and the possible ingredients for its dressing became the versatile images used to allude to the varieties of sexual intercourse and erotic pleasures to be enjoyed between men and women. Salad, Molza suggests playfully, was invented by someone who was annoyed by the exclusively sodomitical practices then current between men and who thus wanted to taste something different, exploring all the possibilities that women had to offer.³¹ The explanation of the dressing of a good Italian salad became then, a metaphor alluding to sexual preferences and even sexual identities. Because men were tired of eating salad without any dressing but salt, they finally came up with the idea of dressing it with both vinegar and oil in different combinations.³² The poet then added that it seemed nonsensical to him that some foreign people like the Spaniards preferred to eat their salad dressed only with vinegar.³³ This playful poetic game quickly becomes a pretext for a brief excursus on national identity and sexual chauvinism: the Spaniards, who use only vinegar on their salad (prefer sodomy), either with men or women, were despised, while the Lombards, who season their salad, i.e. their women, with their specialty food, the mighty “cascio parmigiano” (parmesan cheese), were cheerfully commended for their universal good taste. Molza’s poem calls for variety in sex, as well as in salad, as the secret to happiness; any foodstuff or – sexual practice – be it precious, delicate, or – perverse– after a while became boring in his view. As a way of exemplifying the importance of variety, the poem refers to a literary debate about which was superior, the salad or

²⁹ “And as long as his lust for me lasted, we even put sugar on our salads.” [Rosenthal, *Aretino’s Dialogues*, 153.] One sexual meaning of this sentence refers to the explicit description of an erotic practice, the other to the lack of sophistication displayed in dressing a salad with sugar. “La ultima giornata del capriccio Aretino nella quale la Nanna narra alla Antonia la vita delle puttane,” in *Pietro Aretino Dialoghi*, ed. Davico Bonino, 1: 157-217 (210).

³⁰ Francesco Maria Molza, “Capitolo dell’insalata,” in *Il primo libro dell’opere burlesche, di M. Francesco Berni, di M. Giovanni della Casa, del Varchi, del Mauro, di M. Bino, del Molza, del Dolce, et del Firenzuola* (Florence: Giunti, 1550), 200r-203v. For a modern edition see Francesco Maria Molza, *Capitoli erotici*, ed. Mariella Masieri (Galatina: Congedo, 1999), 59-74. On the *Vignaiuoli* Academy and their poetry see Danilo Romei, “Roma 1532-1537: accademia per burla e poesia ‘tolta in gioco’” in Danilo Romei, *Berni e berneschi del Cinquecento* (Florence: Edizioni Centro 2P, 1984), 49-84; Antonio Marzo, *Studi sulla poesia erotica del Cinquecento. Con appendice di testi* (Lecce: Adriatica Editrice Salentina, 1999) 13-23; David O. Frantz, *Festum Voluptatis. A Study of Renaissance Erotica* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 24-35 and pages 41-46 in Laura Giannetti Ruggiero, “The Forbidden Fruit or the Taste for Sodomy in Renaissance Italy,” in *Quaderni d’italianistica* 27.1 (2006): 31-52.

³¹ The word ‘insalata’ is used to indicate the female genitals (as in Aretino) but also the lower part of the female body and sexual intercourse in general. As a euphemism for female genitals, its usage seems to relate to the verb ‘insalare’ or to dress with salt (salt being a euphemism for the male sexual organ and sperm). See Jean Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage. Le lexique érotique des poètes de l’équivoque de Burchiello à Marino (xv- xvii siècles)* 4 vols. (Lille, Atelier Reproduction des Thèses: Université de Paris III, 1978), I: 1462-1465. In the second day of Aretino’s dialogue between Nanna and her daughter Pippa, a silly woman is defined as a “non-insalata-a-fatto” (or “a really unsalted woman,” i.e. with no intelligence whatsoever). See “In questa seconda giornata del dialogo di Messer Pietro Aretino la Nanna racconta a Pippa sua le poltronerie degli uomini inverso le donne,” in *Pietro Aretino Dialoghi*, ed. Davico Bonino, 2: 99-179 (119).

³² Vinegar is used here to refer to anal intercourse, oil to vaginal intercourse and salt, as was often the case, to the male member or sperm.

³³ “Sempre mi parve di color sciocchezza/che le fan con l’aceto sol la festa/come di Spagna una gran gente apprezza.” [“They seem to me always foolish because they enjoy [sex] only with vinegar, as the important people of Spain do”] Molza, “Capitolo dell’insalata,” vv- 136-38.

the melon. Here the points of reference are poems by Francesco Berni and the Vignaiuoli which associate melons, peaches, and sodomy – only to decide in the end in favor of a good salad.³⁴

Molza wrote his salad poem for his entry into the Vignaiuoli Academy, a group that produced a rich array of “food” poems. The mythical origin of the alimentary predilection of this academy was explained by Annibal Caro (1507-1566), who allusively nicknamed himself Ser Agresto da Ficaruolo [Sir Rustic of Figland] in a commentary, the so-called *Commento di ser Agresto da Ficaruolo sopra la prima Ficata del Padre Siceo* (1539), on a poem on figs again written by Molza.³⁵ According to Caro’s imaginative reconstruction, Berni was thrown out of the garden of the Parnassus due to his lack of reverence for the Muses of poetry, but soon he was able to return in secret with the help of the maidservants, who gave him access to a nearby orchard. There, he had his friends join him, and together they enjoy all sorts of fruit and vegetables, hence their famous poems on food in *terza rima*.³⁶ The metaphor of the orchard, where vegetables of phallic shape, round fruit with their echoes of bottoms and breasts, or fresh salads with their sexual reference to women, are gathered year-round, had great success in letters, poems and other literary genres of the period. This *bernesque* poetry, which playfully overturned the lyrical Petrarchan canon with clever metaphors of a wider range of sexual practices and a mock pedestrian emphasis on the everyday and the superficial, saw its success confirmed in the multiple editions published by Venetian presses at mid-century and its many imitators.³⁷

Despite its popularity, or perhaps because of it, this poetry encountered the scorn of Aretino. In a letter of 1537 to the humanist courtier Sebastiano Fausto da Longiano (1502-70) where he argues against literary imitation and in favor of originality, Aretino directly attacked Berni and his circle of friends, saying that anybody who is hungry (for poetry) screams “portàtici altro che insalata!” Aretino thus emphatically associated a “low” food like salad with the supposed superficiality of Berni and Molza’s poems.³⁸ As is well known, not only salad and fruit prospered in Berni’s orchard of poetry. Different sorts of meat with sexual double meanings – especially succulent sausages – were also highly prized. But the reference to salad seems to cohere perfectly with the old assumption about the commonness and the low position of salads and vegetables in the Great Chain of Being. Evidently Aretino (together with other authors of the

³⁴ “Sotto il giudice ancor la lite pende/ qual debbia di ragion il pregio avere/ l’insalata o il melone, e chi s’intende/ di cotai cose apertamente dice/ ch’a l’ insalata il primo onor si renda.” [“The discussion is still open about who will be the winner, salad or melon, but those who understand such things say that salad should have the place of honor.”] Molza, “Capitolo dell’insalata,” vv. 185-89.

³⁵ “Commento di ser Agresto da Ficaruolo sopra la prima Ficata del Padre Siceo,” in *Gli straccioni: commedia - La Figheide: comento - La nasea e la statua della foia. Dicerie di Annibal Caro* (Bologna: Forni, 1974), 81-161. On *La Figheide*, see Riccardo Scrivano, *Ritratto di Annibal Caro* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2007), 41-62.

³⁶ “Dipoi s’ingegnò tanto, che rubò la chiave del cancello alla Madre Poesia lor Portinara; e misevi dentro una schiera d’altri Poeti baioni, che, ruzzando per l’orto, lo sgominarono tutto, e secondo che andarono loro a gusto, così colsero, e celebrarono, chi le Pesche, chi le Fave, chi i Citriuoli, chi i Carciofi . . .” [“After he gave it great thought, finally he stole the key (to the gardens) of Mother Poetry their Gatekeeper; and he let in a horde of other playful poets, who cavorting through the garden took it over. And according to their whims, they picked and celebrated now one of them Peaches, now another Beans, now this one Cucumbers, now that one Artichokes . . .”] “Commento di ser Agresto,” 93.

³⁷ See Marzo, *Studi sulla poesia erotica del Cinquecento* for a list of the editions of *Opere burlesche* (several dedicated to various types of food) published in the sixteenth century.

³⁸ “Portàtici altro che insalata!” gridano color c’han fame” [“Those who are hungry scream: ‘We want better than salad!’”] in *Pietro Aretino Lettere*, ed. Francesco Erspamer, 2 vols. (Parma: Ugo Guanda, 1995), 1: n. 300: 618-22 (621-22).

time) could intentionally use this image to attack the lack of sophistication of Berni and the Vignaiuoli, who dedicated their poems to such apparently prosaic and common topics such as salads, fruits, vegetables, and even the plague or fleas.³⁹

It seems that, notwithstanding the variety of food discussed in *bernesque* poetry, Aretino was unrelenting in his effort to identify that poetry with only the “lowest” vegetables and greens. In fact, in a celebrated and highly literary letter of 1537 to Gianiacopo Lionardi usually known as *Il sogno del Parnaso*, Aretino portrayed the judgment reserved for the Vignaiuoli by the God of poetry, Apollo, as very harsh, on the order of the Dantean punishment reserved for the gluttons in *Purgatorio*.⁴⁰ In this dream, Aretino finds himself in a big kitchen where a phoenix is roasting on a spit, its rich smell permeating the room, while nearby a group of very thin and hungry men are watching him and eying with envy the fatness of his body. Aretino aggressively interrupts the cook, who just happens to be “badly singing” to the beat of the turning spit a poem by Berni or Giovanni Mauro, to taste a bite of the succulent meat. At this precise moment, the god Apollo makes an appearance, inciting Aretino to eat the meat with more *gusto* in order to make the group of hungry onlookers really suffer. The justification Apollo gives for increasing the men’s torment repeats the trope of “salad poetry:” “Mangia, acìò che quelle carogne quivi, le quali han pasciute tuttavia le mie sorelle di cavoli, d’erbe e d’insalata, abbin più fame.”⁴¹

In this letter, Aretino seems perfectly aware of the complex discourse of food circulating in Italy in those years. It is not by chance that in his dream he eats a roasted phoenix; roasted meat was traditionally a sign of high rank, but in addition, a phoenix was the animal normally placed in the highest possible position in the Great Chain of Being because of its close mythological association with fire. In this way, Aretino fashioned himself, as a writer and intellectual, with

³⁹ Significantly, attacks like Aretino’s against the *bernesque* poets were common in the literary world of the day and even used against Aretino himself. In the spurious dialogue *Vita di Pietro Aretino del Berna*, falsely attributed to Berni, who was already dead when it was published (in 1538), it was claimed that Aretino deserved, instead of a laurel crown, one made of cabbage, lettuce, and radicchio. This may well have been more than a play on the traditional poetic laurel crown of Petrarch, for Aretino had written a famous letter of his own [“Al Signor Gianiacopo Lionardi,” in *Pietro Aretino Lettere*, ed. Erspamer, 1: 575-89 (n. 282)], recounting a dream of his where he is granted by a friend a series of crowns, each made with different plants, according to the different works he wrote. Several plants are named, from the bitter *ruta* (rue) to the laurel, but there is no place for greens. In the dialogue, however, Berni and Giovanni Mauro crown Aretino with a salad crown, noting that as a child he had chosen for himself a crown of cabbage and that such a crown was well deserved as an adult especially for his despised *Dialogo de la corte*. The infamous *Vita di Pietro Aretino del Berna* is interesting for the way it confirms that there was a more general discourse on food that used the images of lettuce, greens, and other low vegetables to indicate low poetry. See “Vita di Pietro Aretino del Berna” in Giovanni Alberto Albicante, *Occasioni Aretiniane (Vita di Pietro Aretino del Berna, Abbattimento, Nuova contentione) Testi proposti da Paolo Procaccioli*, ed. Paolo Procaccioli (Manziana: Vecchiarelli, 1999), 57-96; see 63 and 82 for the descriptions of lettuce and cabbage crowns. On Aretino’s biographers, see Angelo Romano, “I biografi dell’Aretino, dallo pseudo Berni al Mazzucchelli,” in *Pietro Aretino nel cinquecentenario della nascita. Atti del convegno di Roma-Viterbo-Arezzo (28 settembre - 1 ottobre 1992)*, Toronto (23-24 ottobre 1992), Los Angeles (27-29 ottobre 1992), 2 vols., (Rome: Salerno, 1995), 2: 1053-71.

⁴⁰ See letter n. 282 in *Pietro Aretino Lettere*, ed. Erspamer, quoted in the previous note. The letter and its food metaphors have been studied by Silvia Longhi in the context of the poetic rivalry between Aretino and Berni. See Silvia Longhi, “La cucina di Parnaso,” in *Lusus. Il capitolo burlesco nel Cinquecento* (Padova: Antenore, 1983), 57-94, especially 57-66. See also Carlachiarra Perrone, “Un sogno di Pietro Aretino,” in *Pietro Aretino nel cinquecentenario della nascita*, 1: 375-94.

⁴¹ “Eat, eat so that those bastards who fed my companions, the Muses, on cabbage, herbs, and salad will feel more hunger watching you.” *Pietro Aretino Lettere*, ed. Erspamer, 1: 586. For a woodcut of a Renaissance kitchen with roasting meat at the center see Cristoforo di Messisbugo, *Banchetti composizioni di vivande e apparecchio generale* (Ferrara, 1549), ed. Fernando Bandini (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1992), 37.

reference to what he was about to eat. In contrast, using Apollo as his mouthpiece, he fashions negatively the group of poets that he wants to denigrate, by identifying them with the “lowest” vegetables, as both their food and the subject of their poetry. What Aretino portrayed then via food was his own personal vision of the Great Chain of Poetry, with himself at the top and his opponents on the bottom. Clearly, Aretino’s use of this literary trope of “salad poetry” shows the relevance of a discourse of food to signal class and cultural standing. At the same time, however, and more prosaically, once again the undeniable success of erotic poems on food and vegetables – attested by their many published editions – informs his sense of rivalry and his clever negative judgment in using the Vignaiuoli’s own language of food against them.

If in his ideal Parnassus Aretino eats exquisitely refined roasted meat in front of the hungry Vignaiuoli, we know from several letters that in his everyday life he actually ate all sorts of raw greens and appreciated them greatly. Salad as a food that can satisfy all the senses, or salad as a more direct sexual metaphor was as versatile on the table of Aretino as it was in the literary-erotic kitchens of Molza and Berni, their poetic rivalries notwithstanding. As is well known, Aretino loved receiving a wide range of gifts from his admirers. Those gifts helped him to lead a comfortable and leisured life in his Venetian years: from embroidered shirts to elegant glasses and perfumed soaps, he received all sorts of presents, as he broadcasts to potential gift givers in his letters. Food gifts, however, were among his favorites: quails, birds, sausages, cheeses and especially fresh-picked fruit and different kinds of salad greens. In a couple of elegant and almost poetic letters written in 1537, his description of salad greens that he received as gifts compliment their taste, their aesthetic appearance, and their smell, in a *crescendo* of the senses. The baskets of fresh fruit and *insalata di mescolanza* [mixed greens] presented to Aretino by his close friend, the publisher Francesco Marcolini, elicited such a response in Aretino’s household that he related with amusement how the female servants wanted to steal all the beautiful baskets with the salads they contained.⁴² Once again, as in the conversations of the *dialoghi puttaneschi* discussed earlier, salad appears as more than a detail in Aretino’s letters; it is presented as a sign of elegance, evolved taste, and refined manners.

When, in the fall of 1537, the regular presents of summer salad greens from a Venetian gentleman, Girolamo Sarra, came to an end, Aretino wrote him a letter of bitter complaint. Sarra was still sending him *citronella*, an aromatic herb which he remarked he disliked intensely but would eat unhappily until spring, when hopefully his friend would again supply him with the salad salary more suited to his refined tastes for greens.⁴³ This letter is a very apt example of the close attention Aretino devoted to his senses, in this case, taste. As if describing a musical composition, Aretino praises the donor’s ability to balance the bitter and the acute tones of some herbs with the sweetness and smoothness of others to create such a masterpiece of taste that even the personified Satiety would like to enjoy a bite of the resulting salad. The *insalata di mescolanza* Aretino describes could also figure in any one of a number of the still-life paintings that became so common in the seventeenth century and that often featured vegetables and fruits in a highly sensuous manner.

In this letter too, issues of cultural and national identity emerged. Aretino declares with confidence that salad was certainly invented in Florence, where all elegant things had their origins: from table settings with floral decorations, to the cleaning and polishing of glasses, to the preparation of all the delicacies that made Italian cuisine famous. But in the end, Aretino,

⁴² See letter n. 137 in *Pietro Aretino Lettere*, ed. Erspamer, 1: 287-89.

⁴³ See letter n. 217 in *Pietro Aretino Lettere*, ed. Erspamer, 1: 450-53.

anticipating both Felici and Castelvetro, gives his readers a more down-to-earth suggestion for dressing a salad *alla Genovese* with garlic, anchovies, and capers. For such a dish, he comments, he would even trade a feast of the wild birds that his great friend, the painter Titian, often brought him from the mountains of Cadore. The letter also stresses strong tastes that give sharp flavors to a meal and exalts another salad ingredient then on the rise, the wild *radicchio*, a spicy bitter green common at the time (and today) in the Veneto. Discussing *radicchio*'s sharp taste, he relates how during a dinner a guest, a haughty pedant, refused to eat it and asked instead for tasteless lettuce and endive. Needless to say, Aretino, anxious to punish the pedant for his lack of *gusto* and his implied sexual preference, invoked the God of Gardens, Priapus, to punish the pedant appropriately. The letter, quite surprisingly, closes with a rhetorical question: why do poets not dedicate themselves completely to the praise of salad?⁴⁴ This question seems to call for another: had Aretino already forgotten his despised “salad poetry” label for the Vignaiuoli, or had he been converted in his Venetian salad days to more “green” rhymes? What is clear, however, is that Aretino felt quite free to fashion his food discourses to suit his present needs and diatribes.

The cultural discourses that surrounded this simple food in early modern Italy and Europe were complex and rich, ranging from ideas of national character and class identity to conceptions related to medicine and health, manners, taste, gastronomy, and sexuality. The word *insalata* became more popular and increased its metaphorical range: any mixture of different things. We see this figurative sense, for example, in the title to a chronicle of the city of Mantua written in the second half of the sixteenth century: *La insalata: cronaca mantovana dal 1561 al 1602*. At folio six of the manuscript, before the author's introduction, the text makes a nod toward the literal meaning of its title. There appear the *ricetta* “Per Far Una Saporita et Bella Insalata,” listing herbs, flowers, fruits, and different dressings together with a final motto that playfully declares “Leva carnevale resta la quaresima [Taking away carnival leaves lent].”⁴⁵ In the same period, in Spain, “ensalada” came to signify a new type of musical composition characterized by a variety of styles, irregular meter, and humorous verses.⁴⁶

In the end, a salad, at least, was not simply a salad. It had become much more than a food; it had also gained a significant status as a trope in the literary imagination of the Italian Renaissance, alluding to poetical play, the display of refined manners, good taste, and Italian botanical, agricultural, national, and cultural identity. The discourse of salad was not univocal, as it could be used in defense of delicate and upper-class tastes or of more earthy *gusto*; it could serve *bernesque* poets and cutting *anti-bernians* like Aretino as well. But the traditional link – established in Galenic medicine – between ideal social hierarchy and the consumption of vegetables and greens had been significantly broken by the end of the sixteenth century, and a new food fashion had emerged that was truly a matter of taste in all senses.

Figurative arts readily registered the changed perceptions about raw vegetables and greens, displaying them in all their color, beauty, and sensuousness in a new genre that came into its own in seventeenth-century art in Italy: the still-life. A painting by Felice Boselli from the second half of the seventeenth century is particularly significant as an illustration of this point. It shows a

⁴⁴ “Certo io stupisco come i poeti non si sbrachino per cantar le virtù de l'insalata.” [“Certainly I am amazed that poets don't drop their drawers to sing the virtues of salad.”] *Pietro Aretino Lettere*, ed. Erspamer, 1:452.

⁴⁵ Giovanni Battista Vigilio, *La insalata. Cronaca mantovana dal 1561 al 1602*, eds. Daniela Ferrari and Cesare Mozzarelli (Mantova: Gianluigi Arcari Editore, 1992).

⁴⁶ I would like to thank the musicologist Klaus Pietschmann, a Harvard Villa I Tatti Fellow and colleague, for suggesting this connection.

pretty, lower-class, young woman along side a New World *ara macao*, a bird symbolic of luxury for rich residences and wealthy people; in her hands, she holds a “rapa nasone” a turnip considered to be an earthy aphrodisiac, while curly lettuce is displayed in great abundance in front of her.⁴⁷ In this painting, lower- and upper-class symbols, erotic and luxury items, raw greens and birds are mixed and united to novel effect: a new Great Chain of Being, classes, and taste were being born. (fig. n. 1: Felice Boselli’s painting.)



Felice Boselli (Piacenza 1650-1732): *Giovinetta che mostra una rapa, ara macao, verze, rape, sedano, e insalata riccia*. (Private collection. Courtesy of Giovanni Godi)

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⁴⁷ Felice Boselli was a well-known painter of still-life from Emilia-Romagna. For an analysis of his “Giovinetta che mostra una rapa” see Eleonora Frattarolo, “Scheda n. 70,” in *Fasto e rigore. La natura morta nell’Italia settentrionale dal xvi al xvii secolo*, ed. Giovanni Godi (Milan: Skira Editore, 2000), 197.

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