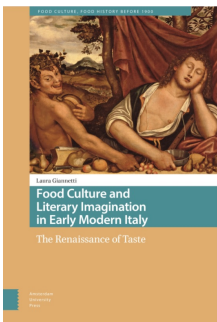


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Laura Giannetti

Food Culture and Literary Imagination in Early Modern Italy

Review by: Eleanor Barnett



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Food Culture and Literary Imagination in Early Modern Italy offers fascinating new insights into the food culture of sixteenth-century Italy by analyzing an impressive range of early modern literary texts. It is a lively and detailed exploration of the changing ways in which food was consumed metaphorically and literally, that draws upon Laura Giannetti's corpus of existing articles published elsewhere from 2006 onwards. By studying plays, poems, private letters, diaries, and visual sources alongside prescriptive texts like dietaries and religious tracts, Giannetti concludes that by the end of the sixteenth century new positive ideas of «*gusto*» (or «taste») had come to compete with the traditional more restrictive social, religious, and medical discourse on food and eating. This focus on the physical and aesthetic sense of taste is welcome given that it is still an understudied and emerging field of scholarship, which helps us better understand lived experiences in sixteenth - century Italy.

The argument proceeds over four distinct chapters. Chapter one pits a variety of literary sources against prescriptive dietetic advice to present an alternative reading of how diet related to social class in the Cinquecento. In particular, Giannetti argues that two luxurious upper-class foods – fruit and roasted fowl – commanded, by the end of the sixteenth century «a place at both the metaphorical and real table for a much wider social spectrum» (p. 29), as the

traditional food classification system, based on the teachings of the ancient Greeks, lost ground to an emphasis on taste and pleasure in dietary decision-making. At the same time, distinctively in Italy, salad transcended from a lowly food to reach aristocratic diners. The second chapter moves from a focus on the links between class and food to challenge prescriptive notions of health and moderation in diet, which emerged alongside the Galenic revival of the sixteenth century and the heightened moral fervor of the Counter-Reformation. While doctors and moralists had long warned of the ruinous health implications of excessively consuming melons, for instance, the fruit was celebrated for its pleasurable taste by all but the strictest «would-be disciplinarians» (p. 121) by the end of the century. Addressing next the themes of sexuality and gender, Chapter three studies burlesque poetry equating fruit and vegetables with sexual and sensual pleasure in contrast to a traditional medical-dietetic discourse that frowned upon these foodstuffs, while Chapter four explores women's resistance to the gendered dietary restrictions that were put forward in prescriptive texts. Each chapter reads much like an individual article, each taking a slightly different format, which makes the structure and flow of the book at times appear disjointed. The reader would also have benefitted from a separate conclusion that pulled the four sections together.

Flowing across all chapters, however, are questions about the inevitable divide between the prescription and reality of eating practices in the early modern period. Take, for instance, the prescriptive literature on women's diets, which maintained, based on Aristotelian medicine, that female bodies were cold and moist in humoral theory and should therefore avoid wine. A religious tradition also encouraged women to abstain from food, associating their sex with Eve's original sin and therefore with uncontrollable bodily appetites, including gluttony and lust. In reality, it is perhaps unsurprising, given what we know of human nature, to learn from Giannetti's analysis, that many women – even those strictly locked away in post-Tridentine convents – instead enjoyed sampling a variety of luxurious foods and sweet wines. Likewise, Giannetti claims that even the poor who constantly faced the threat of famine and starvation valued taste in dietary decision-making by the end of the century, rather than simply eating to survive or according to medical instruction. Only by studying «theoretical, prescriptive, descriptive, and imaginative» (p. 15) sources in tandem, as Giannetti masterfully does, can we access the complexities of ideas and experiences that made up Cinquecento food culture, with all its contradictions and nuances.

Giannetti's work is at its most compelling when space is given to in-depth literary analysis, which allows a better appreciation of how writers used polemic and wit to comment on societal norms. The humorous food-centric rhymes of Bernesque poetry have rarely been taken seriously for what they tell us about the sixteenth-century culture of food. In chapter four, Giannetti shows, however, how these writings challenged contemporary medical discourse, playfully using food metaphors to celebrate the forbidden sin of sodomy as well as the pleasures of eating fruits that physicians deemed to be unhealthy. Other literary texts like novellas and plays that counteracted prescriptive norms on diet are similarly often interpreted to be simply humorous imaginations of a «world-upside-down», a genre which actually worked, ultimately, to reinforce traditional strictures. Instead, Giannetti convincingly argues that the literary imagination not only reflected wider changes in food consumption, but in turn helped to shape that culture. Literature and food were not separated as part of «high» and «low» culture respectively, but interacted in a circular and interconnected manner.

For such a rich and complex topic there are inevitably areas that could have been addressed more thoroughly. For example, it would have been useful to explore how early modern people understood the sensation of taste and pleasure to function physiologically, in order to better contextualize their bodily experiences. In other words, what did contemporaries think was happening in the body when certain foods tasted nicer than others, even if this judgement contradicted medical prescriptions? More direct attention, too, could have been drawn to the impact of the Counter-Reformation on the central debate surrounding taste and moderation. How did this mounting religious and moral fervor interact with the seemingly concurrent «progressive 'decline' of the sin of gluttony» (p. 42), for example? If the two competing modes of approaching food coexisted, how do we really judge at what point one faded and the other triumphed?

By maintaining that the shift towards a positive appreciation of taste occurred over the course of the sixteenth century in Italy, Giannetti argues against otherwise formative scholarship (that by Jean-Louis Flandrin and Viktoria von Hoffman) that has rooted this change a century later in France. Yet, as Giannetti notes, the Italian food historian Massimo Montanari has also argued that it was the sixteenth century that witnessed the change from good taste being defined by what is good for the body to what pleases the body. What *Food Culture and Literary Imagination in Early Modern Italy* does so well is to draw this out through a retelling of a range of rich Cinquecento sources that espouse the concept of taste when making real or imagined dietary decisions. The book's focus on food in the literary imagination tells us not just about what sixteenth-century people were eating, but much more about the society and culture in which they lived, from class identities, to female experiences, and homosexuality. It will appeal, then, to academics and students interested not only in the history of food or sixteenth-century literature, but in better understanding the Renaissance period itself.