Food and Feast as Propaganda in Late Renaissance Italy

Ken Albala

It was an unusually balmy evening in August as the guests approached the Castello Estense decked out in multi-colored silks. The still air seemed to soften the forbidding brick battlements and one could catch the faint aroma of rosemary wafting through the open parapets. Flames flickered from within and the thin plaintive notes of viols cut through the crimson-streaked sky. The line of guests slowly ambled their way over the moat and through the portcullis, up the central staircase, past Flemish tapestries depicting the labors of Hercules. Upon reaching the grand hall each pair was formally announced by the scalco (Steward) and shown to their places beneath the richly painted ceiling, surrounded by frescos. The Duke and his family had not yet arrived, but the credenza was already adorned with majolica platters, heaped with elegant little pastries filled with boar meat, peacocks studded with cinnamon, carp from the Po Delta on thin slices of citron, capon and clear gelatins, massive cheeses from Piacenza, endive salads and dishes of cream. Elegantly folded napkins stood crisply at each setting beside golden forks and spoons and carvers waited attentively with knives ready to commence the service.

That is how it might have happened one summer night in Ferrara. The brief account in Giovanni Battista Rossetti’s sixteenth century banquet management guide, Dello Scalco, does not offer the details. But it does reveal that banquets in Italian courts of the latter sixteenth century were extravagant multi-media events meant to astound and overwhelm the senses of participants. They included music, entertainment, perfumes and flowers as well as the elaborate displays of food to feast the eyes as well as the palate. These banquets were meticulously recorded in published works which described how to throw similar events. Smaller courts could learn how to imitate their superiors’ dining practices just as
they imitated their manners, dress and speech through the pages of other ‘how to’ manuals. Thus, these books served as a form of propaganda extolling the taste and refinement of court for those unable to attend. This literature was also a superb form of advertisement for the small Italian courts as they hoped to become the model of sophistication and refined taste for their larger neighbors such as France and Spain. The Italians’ relation to these states was precarious. Much of the peninsula had either been conquered in the course of the Habsburg-Valois Wars or was now tacitly controlled by the larger powers. Marriage alliances were crucial to the survival of many Italian states. Furthermore, stuck between the ever expanding Italian city-states were smaller independent courts waiting to be gobbled up. These small courts needed the protection of the nation-states, but had little to offer in terms of resources or arms. Instead they offered culture: art and architecture, literature, gardening and cuisine.

Knowing full well their resources could never match those of royal kitchens, they still spent exorbitant sums on banquets, often draining their treasuries in an effort to impress. What they could not achieve in terms of sheer volume of food was made up for with dexterous technique and sophisticated presentation. The published accounts also made sure these prodigal feasts survived beyond a single evening. The small courts spent their fortunes on what might be considered frivolous entertainment precisely because they depended on their powerful protectors and needed to market themselves as paragons of refined culture. Perhaps they needed to convince themselves of this as well. In any case, a fabulous banquet with novel inventions could smooth relations, cement alliances and marriage deals or flatter a potential protector. They were thus seen as an essential part of the propaganda necessary to statecraft.

Exactly what message these banquets and their published accounts intended to project is another matter though. The painting and architecture of the mannerist period have been studied at length, as has the literature. These too served as forms of propaganda with explicit encoded statements intended to dazzle readers and viewers. What though could a banquet say apart from impressing guests with sheer profusion of food and its elaboration? These were, of course, goals in themselves, but it should be possible to look deeper, to decode as it were, the complex symbolism, associations and intentions that underlie the order of service, the ingredients and especially the methods of cookery. By exploring the details of the typical banquet a reconstruction of its message will be presented, much as one might explore the symbolism and artist’s intention in a still life painting or the imagery in a poem.