

## **From the plate to the palate:**

### **Visual delights from the vegetable kingdoms of Italy**

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*Italians, in both gastronomy and the visual arts, have enjoyed and celebrated the beauty of vegetables. At one time wild and cultivated plants, grains and pulses, fruit and flowers, nuts and seeds, had been seen as food for animals, the poor, and the not so well off, then tastes changed, and some vegetables joined fruit as part of the diet of the rich and fashionable. They had always been part of the Lenten diet: on the days when the faithful abstained from meat and often from dairy products and eggs, they enjoyed vegetables, raw and cooked, as well as fish. This paper looks at images from the Renaissance onwards to show how what foreigners despised as “food for bruit beasts” came in Italy to grace the tables of the rich and famous, and hang in gilt-framed splendour as images on their walls.*

*Food historians have found evidence for this in household accounts and archive material, and even the cookery books of the wealthy, with their profusion of rich meat and fish recipes, also have luxurious vegetable dishes and salads. Naturalists, horticulturalists, physicians, intellectuals, artists, and humble cooks all contributed to a climate of opinion that appreciated and rejoiced in the vegetable world. This paper explores some of the visual and material evidence, and the continuing importance of vegetables in Italian life.*

The wonderfully accurate images of fruit and vegetables decorating the Loggia di Psiche in the villa now known as the Farnesina, built in Rome for Agostino Chigi, a rich banker and businessman, were the work of Giovanni da Udine, an associate of Raphael. They were painted in 1518, probably inspired by Chigi's interest in natural history, an enthusiasm shared with his friend the Medici Pope Leo X. The story of Psyche, as told by Apuleius, is illustrated in the vaulted ceiling of the outdoor terrace or loggia. Psyche was a mortal nymph with whom Cupid fell in love, and who after many vicissitudes, including the jealousy of Venus and a brush with the Underworld, was permitted to marry him and join the gods on Olympus. The architectural features separating the vaults of the loggia are decorated with a profusion of fruit and vegetables from the kingdom of Ceres, a celebration of fertility and fecundity, in which the joys of love, procreation and abundance were rammed home in a welter of priapic symbolism. Many vegetables lend themselves to this and were presented in arrangements which leave us in no doubt as to their significance. Both patron and artist had no problem with this conceit of reconciling botanical precision and erotic pagan mythology. Vasari, the painter's biographer, enjoyed the phallic symbolism, and his enthusiasm has distracted some historians from the more mundane merits of these representations of fruit and vegetables. The loggia is best considered in relation to the rest of the villa where every room was decorated with a profusion of gods and goddesses behaving badly and mortals growing old disgracefully, but only here, in an area connecting the interior with the gardens and orchards of the outside world, is this display of pagan voluptuousness framed and adorned with the generous gifts of nature, representations that would eventually become a genre in their own right.

Giovanni da Udine painted plants that had arrived only 20 years before from the New World; he would have been able to study these in the gardens and collections of Rome's intellectual elite with their villas in the tranquil rural area across the Tiber. Chigi, with commercial interests all over Europe and the New World, was well placed to procure specimens. The artist could thus work from life, depicting the fruit and flowers in various stages of ripeness and maturity. There is an attention to detail not always visible from below. (Seeing them on the printed page is a more comfortable experience than craning the neck and squinting upwards towards the vaulted ceiling of the loggia.) We have sightings of aubergines, known in the south but less popular elsewhere; asparagus, by then a popular delicacy; artichokes, a wide range of cucumbers, melons, gourds and squashes, grains, including the recent arrival maize, pulses, broad beans, peas, the new beans from the New World, several varieties of *cucurbita* (marrows great and small), musk melon, and the common bean (*Phaseolus vulgaris*), well before their appearance in published herbals. (Columbus had not met chillies and tomatoes, which accounts for their absence in the Loggia.) In addition, there were green vegetables like spinach, chard, a range of cabbages, the beautiful flower heads of fennel and elder, the blossoms of orange, lemon, myrtle and roses, and root vegetables from carrot and parsnip to the various turnip and radish, and salad roots like rampions, nuts of all kinds, and a profusion of succulent fruit, symbols of love and fertility and destined for the tables of the rich – peaches, apricots, cherries, apples, pears, azaroles.

There had been earlier detailed observations of fruit and vegetables in paintings, like the apples and cucumbers in the religious works of Crivelli, in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, which are there for their symbolism. In “The Annunciation” from Ascoli

Piceno, apples and cucumbers, far from being the recommended diet of a young pregnant urban housewife, represented the purity of Christ and the fecundity of his mother. Mantegna had used the glowing beauty of citrus fruit in many of his paintings of the Virgin and Child; in the “Madonna della Vittoria” she sits enthroned under a huge bower of oranges, lemons, limes, and citrons, which could be a reference to local innovations in their cultivation, a sort of agribusiness where capital was needed for the construction and maintenance of the terraces and protective shelters to safeguard this sensitive fruit during the northern winters round Lake Garda.

Caravaggio, whose numinous “Basket of Fruit” is perhaps the most compelling still life of all, was influenced by artists in the north of Italy who were painting kitchen and market scenes full of fruit and vegetables. Vincenzo Campi’s “Fruit-seller” shows a winsome young woman surrounded by fruit and vegetables piled in dishes and baskets, overlapping each other like the dishes in a Veronese banquet. While the bunch of grapes she holds and the pile of white peaches glowing on the green apron on her lap probably have symbolic importance, the majority of fruit and vegetables speak for themselves. They show the contents of the kitchen garden, and indicate how they were appreciated and prepared. The asparagus and artichokes in the bottom left hand corner are set apart from the rest, still expensive luxuries; a close look reveals a bunch of herbs lurking under the artichokes, perhaps the *mentuccia* traditionally used in *carciofi alla romana*. In the right hand bottom corner is a blowsy cabbage, which was both peasant food and, later, an amusing salad for the rich. Fresh young peas are shown shelled, and in their pods (there was also a mange tout variety, eaten when young and tender, with salt and vinegar), they are the lux-

ury, kitchen garden variety, not the dried staple that kept men and beasts going throughout the winter months. Broad beans too are shown as fresh and young, enjoyed then as now, raw with a salty cheese. The pale pink roses scattered over them may have a symbolic role (freshness and purity, a link to the young woman, whose bunch of grapes can indicate both virginity and fruitfulness in marriage). Fronds and bulbs of wild fennel are there, and freshly picked mulberries arranged on a white dish, with a faint blush of juice and a scavenging fly. This is a static, silent composition, in spite of fruit pickers in the background, no buying or selling, no market cries. The fruit and vegetables span the seasons, from the asparagus of early spring to the pumpkins of summer and the cabbages of autumn – most of them food for the rich, not for the market people in Campi's "Fish Stall" who are enjoying a dish of beans with ribald merriment. Here the artist creates a noisy scene, wriggling fresh fish, vulgar market people, a scavenging cat and barking dog. Some commentators see a connection between the alleged consequences of bean eating and the howling incontinent infant.

Beans are the main item in Carracci's "The Bean Eater," in which a man is devouring, rather messily, a bowl of black-eyed beans; he grasps a piece of bread in one none too clean hand while slurping a spoonful of beans with the other. The bunch of spring onions is the traditional seasoning of the poor, their pungency a welcome substitute for costly pepper or spices. The man scowls with the urgency of hunger, a battered straw hat still on his head, but he wears a clean white shirt, but this is not a totally crude meal, the table is laid with a clean white cloth, the red wine from a nice maiolica jug is served in a glass goblet, a roughly cut up tart re-

veals what could be a filling of ricotta and spinach, perhaps a meal eaten in an inn, the guest a famished countryman.

It was the gastronomic prestige they had among the wealthy, after centuries of scorn and neglect, that made humble vegetables like beans a subject for artists, and salads an inspiration to poets and writers. Once they were prized at the table they appeared on canvas, and by the 17<sup>th</sup> century their portraits were hanging on the walls in gilt frames. Attitudes to vegetables had changed since the Middle Ages, when Albertus Magnus codified the hierarchy of edible plants, a theme discussed by Allen J. Grieco in revealing detail. Roots and pulses were low on the list of vegetable matter, low in their relationship to the earth, food only for the base and the low. In the “Great Chain of Being,” trees and their fruit were top of the heap, being nearest to heaven, then came arborescent shrubs, shrubs, bushes, vines (trailing and creeping), and then herbaceous plants, with roots lurking well below the ground. Grieco has shown how an analysis of household accounts indicates that vegetables and salads were becoming fashionable in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Vegetables never appeared in aristocratic banquet menus or recipe books of the Middle Ages, even though the poor and less well off were growing and eating them. By the 1460s Platina, a self made man, was defensive about his enjoyment of vegetables in the company of other impoverished intellectuals, but they were already creeping into the repertoire of his friend Martino who, cooking for the rich, gives a lovely delicate recipe for fresh broad beans, one for mange-tout peas, a rich cabbage dish, and many uses of spinach and fresh herbs.

About this time the Gonzagas in Mantua were enjoying a small bunch of asparagus, sent to the Duchess, Barbara Hohenzollern, a patron of Platina, in 1446 by her steward: “Forgive me, there are so few, but I’m sending them since they are a novelty.” In fact artichokes had been known to the Romans and when they were served to Caesar at a banquet in Cisalpine Gaul in 55 BC, his astonishment was at the exotic barbarian sauce of melted butter, not at the tender shoots. We see them being grown in a contemporary *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, a field full of them, harvested by straw-hatted peasants. Almost a century later, in 1530, Isabella d’Este was ordering two cartloads of asparagus to be sent to the Palazzo Te for her self-indulgent son. They appeared in Psyche’s loggia in 1518, a decorative bundle of spears wrapped in the broad leaves of flags. Being seasonal and a luxury, they figure in many later still lifes, often alongside artichokes, whose wildly swirling foliage and flower heads lend themselves to decorative compositions.

Artichokes, related to the thistle and cardoon, had been around for some time in the south, introduced from the Arab world in the Middle Ages, but forgotten and unknown in the north. Isabella d’Este, greedy as ever, enjoyed them and demanded supplies of seeds and plants from their agent in Genoa. In 1529, Isabella’s son Federigo ordered 300 plants for his kitchen garden. Later in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the great naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi commissioned illustrations of every kind of animal and vegetable, and among them is an unhappy pet monkey squatting on scarlet silk and grasping a fine plump artichoke, both the animal and the vegetable exotic perquisites of the seriously rich.

The tender leaf base and soft flower base with their pervasive slightly bitter flavour was eventually cultivated in a variety of sizes and colours, and by the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century Giovanna Garzoni included three kinds in one of the miniatures of fruit and vegetables commissioned by the Medici.

The Grand Duke had inherited the family enthusiasm for natural history that had inspired Pope Leo X (son of Lorenzo the Magnificent), and Garzoni's work was an indication of their interests. Other artists were employed to produce still life paintings as well as scientific work. One of these was Jacopo Chimenti, known to his friends as Empoli. "Empimi! Empimi!" was his cry, "Fill me up! Fill me up!" This is just what he did with the good things assembled for the composition of his kitchen still life paintings of the 1620s. A contemporary biographer, Filippo Baldinucci, described how, when he had finished a huge canvas full of flesh, fowl, and a variety of cured and preserved meats, Chimenti would gather friends and assistants in his studio to devour the lot together. The main body of his work consisted of religious subjects which did not offer the same scope for gluttony, although Chimenti showed in them his talent for the accurate depiction of everyday objects. This spirit of scientific accuracy was fostered and encouraged by the Medici rulers of Tuscany in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, who were assiduous in their encouragement of agriculture, industry, and commerce, together with the arts that served them. Science was the mainspring of all these endeavours, the inspiration of the artists whose works celebrate the fruit and vegetables that the Medici saw as important contributions to the Tuscan economy. They and other rich noblemen put a lot of energy into both estate management and the collection of rare and exotic plants, and the patronage of botanists and the artists who recorded their achievements. Even in his meat-



laden orgies Chimenti allowed the presence of walnuts, a huge cauliflower, radishes and citrus fruits as well as a rope of garlic. Another kitchen scene is almost vegetarian in its scope, with grapes, onions, a serpentine gourd, the *trombetto di Albenga*, radishes, lettuce, figs, peaches, nuts, squash, eggplants, pears, and some ham and cheese and various promising jugs and bottles, more than enough for a fine studio snack.

Noblemen and scientists got together and formed academies for the investigation and discussion of natural phenomena, language, and literature, physics and astronomy. Some of the artists they employed to record their findings were also busy on portraits of fruit and flowers for their ducal patrons. The greatest of these academies was the Accademia Galileiana del Cimento, a collection of scientists and scholars under the patronage of the Medici dukes, who presided over the gatherings at which scientific experiments were conducted and faithfully recorded. It managed to keep alive the ideas and ideals of Galileo even after his disgrace and persecution. Conviviality was a less well recorded aspect of their deliberations, but some of the activities of the Accademia Galileiana del Cimento during the hottest months of the year had practical gastronomical applications – there are numerous mentions of experiments in the freezing of lemon juice, orange blossom water, cinnamon cordial, and other “waters” or liqueurs.

The arrival from Rome in 1662 of a series of miniatures by Giovanna Garzoni was another source of pleasure to the Medici rulers. These delicately stippled works on parchment are a celebration of the beauties of fruit and vegetables that the painter must have known would appeal to her patrons. Almost in movement on the

plate on which they sit, itself balanced in a strange equilibrium on an uneven rocky surface, the stalks of cherries seem to wave at us, while a few already rather dry broad beans contrast with the manic fruit. In another painting peas strive to burst from their pods, dry and ready for keeping, unlike the ephemeral pink and white roses that flop, overblown, on top of the heap. Three different varieties of artichoke sit in a blue and white bowl, surmounted by a pink rose, with a few strawberries on a stem on the ground, expensive seasonal luxuries. Lemons and their fragrant blossoms fill a chipped maiolica dish. A bowl of fresh broad beans reminds one of the pleasure of eating them young with a fresh salty cheese, reminding us how vegetables were prized alongside exotic fresh flowers and luscious fruit.

Garzoni's portraits of citrus fruit and their flowers would have appealed to her Medici patrons. Fruit grown from the grafts and cuttings of the ducal gardeners, evidence of the passion of collectors and the skills of horticulturalists, were used in laboratory and boudoir as well as the kitchen. Later Cosimo would commission vaster works; his physician Francesco Redi had drawing lessons from the artist Filizio Pizzichi who told him of an unknown young painter, Bartolomeo Bimbi, who was doing exquisite flower pieces. Redi showed his work to Cosimo, who commissioned a series of wonderful group portraits of fruit, and some obsessive studies of monstrosities, of which the outsized vegetables are the most appealing to us, putting the gigantism of prize marrows at our village fêtes quite in the shade. These massive mug shots were executed life size, with a caption stating the weight, dimensions, and provenance of the monster. The gastronomic and visual virtues of these are somewhat questionable, presenting a challenge to the artist which Bimbi met by painting the ugly things to fill most of the canvas, as if crushed and con-

fined within the frame, with dramatic lighting and props which conveyed a spurious grandeur, like parodies of heroic ducal portraits. The squash from the Grand Ducal Garden at Pisa is depicted against a wild landscape and a stormy sky, with the leaning tower of Pisa dwarfed in the distance. A cut section lights up the sombre scene with its golden flesh. Fast work was needed with this 177-pound monster, already somewhat deliquescent on its arrival after the long journey to Florence. A contemporary account tells how it was led by the artist to his studio, carried by two strong men, to the applause of an excited crowd of onlookers. A giant cauliflower, glowing within its ring of dark green leaves in the last rays of a troubled evening light, weighed in at 18 pounds, dwarfing its companion, a mighty horseradish, a mere 8 pounds. A crinkly-leafed cabbage is growing in a terracotta pot, on a rocky background, its rather boring foliage lit against a lowering purple sky. An ugly giant beetroot, raised by Filippo Strozzi in March of 1712, still encrusted with the earth from which it had been hewn, is crowned with its foliage, but redeemed by a section cut through the same root, showing coloured rings glowing in the bright spring sunshine. Perhaps the most unprepossessing item in the collection is a giant elderly truffle from Castel Leone, shown whole and in section, weighing four and half pounds, with a caption that gives an all too depressing idea of its rugged state: "Unlike the soft, smooth interior of a normal truffle this has an uneven, earthy, porous appearance, divided by a multitude of layers, red and white and other colours, with reddish worm-like growths, a strange change in substance wrought over many years." It is a relief to turn to the golden *ovolo* from Castelfranco di Sopra found on 22 June 1695, 23 ounces of a succulent Caesar's or egg mushroom, of the *agaricaceae* family, a cut section revealing its beautiful interior, framed by dark wrinkled chestnut leaves with an evening sky beyond.

But Bimbi's major achievements were the huge group portraits of every fruit grown in Cosimo's domains, now to be seen at the villa at Poggio a Caiano outside Florence. Each fruit is numbered and named in a cartouche, amazingly fresh and lively but outside the scope of our examination of vegetables in art.

Salads had also become hugely fashionable, cooked or raw, and even visually boring lettuces and roots were now part of still lifes, genre and kitchen scenes. Salads were originally salt meats or capers, olives, anchovies, and other foods preserved in salt presented in various combinations, hence the name *insalata*. Hot or cold vegetable dishes from fresh vegetables came to be served as salads. (June di Schino has given us an exhaustive account of the joys of the salad, celebrated in literature and history, in her paper in this symposium, on Salvatore Massonio, Giacomo Castelvetro and Costanzo Felici..)

Meanwhile Isabella d'Este delights yet again with her pleasing greed. In February 1519 she wrote to her brother in Ferrara enclosing seeds of a special kind of cabbage, bossily telling him how to prepare it: "You have to cut away the tough stems and boil the leaves for only a little in water, until the cabbage is just tender, then refresh it in water and dress it with oil and vinegar like a salad. *V. Ex. vederà poi se gli piacerà questa straneza.*" (And then Your Excellency will see how you enjoy this strange novelty.)

This strange novelty was also enjoyed by her nephew Ippolito in Ferrara. His steward's accounts show the purchase of salads on his journey to France in 1536,

so they were by then a rich young man's pleasure, and readily obtainable. Isabella had been assiduous in her pursuit of vegetables – blanched chicory for salads, lettuce seeds from Modena, cabbage seeds, cucumbers and a barrel of pickled fennel from Genoa, white chickpeas, and pumpkin seeds. In 1532 she was demanding *semenza di merizane*, the “mad apples,” *mele insane* or *melanzane*, a real novelty in the north, described by Costanzo Felice 30 years later as just a pretty face, more of a pleasure for the eye than the palate, but already seen in profusion in Psyche's Loggia in Rome in 1518.

It would be a mistake, though, to assume that salads were a novelty; the poor and middling sort of people had always eaten them. This is seen in an analysis of the household accounts of one of the canny Tuscan merchant Francesco Datini's establishments in Pisa in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, where expenditure on salads is higher than on any other vegetable. Frugal merchants and monks had always eaten vegetables out of necessity, and salads were everyday fare to them long before they became fashionable enough to become literature.

The reclusive painter Pontormo often ate salads, carefully noted in the journal, begun in 1554, in which he recorded work in progress and his states of mind and body. Influenced by Condivi's recently published biography of Michelangelo he aimed at a prudent moderation in eating and drinking.

Lean or Lenten menus were sketched by Michelangelo on the back of a letter in 1518; they included salt fish, pasta, salad, fennel and spinach, no cheese or eggs, and no mention of fruit. But this was food of some sophistication, not peasant food,

prepared with care for a master craftsman who could afford to eat well while working on the rock face at Pietra Santa.

Pontormo's rock face was the chapel in the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, where, elderly and infirm, he toiled with grumpy concentration on the writhing mass of bodies, his homage to Michelangelo's Last Judgement. His diet, over which he brooded as the self-absorbed often do, was exemplary: plenty of good Tuscan bread, local wine, rolled omelettes, salads of lettuce, or borage flowers, or *barba di frate*, stewed peas, broad beans, probably raw in mid March, asparagus in April, cooked radicchio, cabbage, borage stems, sometimes stewed mutton, or bits of offal, or salt fish, occasionally cheese. Sundays he usually ate with Bronzino (who wrote a poem about salads) and his extended family when there would be fresh fish, meat or chicken, and cheerful company; this seemed to do Pontormo good, even if he had no appetite for supper. This modest but pleasant and varied diet cannot possibly be seen as an indication of Mannerist angst or austerity.

Mannerist pomp was to be found in the banquet menus published by Bartolomeo Scappi in 1570, and the patrons of these artists, and possibly Michelangelo himself, might well have been guests at some of them. There over 40 fine cooked vegetable dishes in Scappi's recipe sections, but hardly any mention of salads, which have to be searched for in the hundreds of menus he lists. In the course of the banquets the rich hot food from the kitchen alternated with cold food from the *credenza* or sideboard, allowing discriminating guests to make wise choices, to select a salad of asparagus to follow a rich meat dish, or a few grapes before the boned stewed calves head with garlic and walnut sauce. A meal in the middle of May had seasonal deli-

cacies – raw baby artichokes with salt and pepper, cooked ones with vinegar, and fresh young mange tout peas. A lighter supper the same day included salads of lettuce and blue borage flowers, one of asparagus, a *mescolanza*, and a wonderful salad of sliced citron, dressed with sugar and rosewater, then there were raw and cooked baby artichokes, and *scasi*, sugar snap or mange tout young peas. In the autumn there were salads of carrots, of chicory and of endive; raw cardoons first appeared in October, and truffles, raw and cooked, spinach turned in oil with raisins, capers, and *mosto cotto*. As winter approached there were salads of cooked carrots, cooked onions, and alexanders, along with the usual truffles and roast chestnuts, and soon the crisp roots of chicory and rampions. *Cavoli Bolognesi in minestra con pezzi di cascio per dentro* is a rare sighting of the humble cabbage, and there is a rich dish of turnips cooked with sausages and fennel seeds in January.

Salads as such, in a dish or on a plate, are not often found in art; they usually appear in paintings of Christ sharing a simple meal with disciples. A bowl of green leaves does not have the glamour or quite the same symbolic significance as fruit, (except as the bitter herbs of exile). But salad ingredients often occur in still lifes and kitchen scenes, and many ambiguous bundles of roots and shoots were destined to be eaten raw as salads.

The gastronomic slumming of the Gonzagas and Estes was repeated a generation later when the Grand Duke Ferdinand in Florence commissioned Cristoforo Munari in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to produce a series of still life paintings with high and low themes, from bacon and eggs in a terracotta dish, to sponge fingers dunked in wine in the exquisite glassware produced in the Medici factories, rivalling Venetian

ware. One of these works could refer to a typical Tuscan dish of pancetta and cabbage, where a rosy pink chunk of cured pork leans like the foreshortened skull in Holbein's "Ambassadors" against a blowsy cabbage. Another cabbage has a central position in a kitchen scene where the artist's affection for homely domestic pots and pans and ingredients might have reminded the artist's patrons of the cuisine of his native city, Reggio Emilia. Mushrooms, game birds, and live dormice nibbling a leaf of the cabbage hint at an earthy recipe. Cardoons, bread, salame, and ham are the subjects of one of a pair of paintings executed for Ferdinando in 1703. Sometimes rustic food is juxtaposed with hot house fruit and oriental ceramics, another example of the Medici taste for enjoying local products alongside expensive luxuries.

From animal food to elitist luxury, vegetables have been a part of the life and art of Italy for centuries, and it is a pleasure and an education to explore the evidence for this.