

BEPPINA AND THE KITCHENS
OF AREZZO

Life and Culinary History in an Ancient Tuscan City

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❖ PREFACE ❖

Strange to relate it was partly the weather that was responsible for the beginning of my long attachment to the ancient city of Arezzo. For many years our beautiful, largely unaltered farmhouse near the borders of Tuscany and Umbria had been a base in Europe for our peripatetic lives spent working on archaeological sites in Egypt, and travelling while film-making. There in that peaceful valley our beloved neighbours the Cerotti family, about whom I wrote in *The Tuscan Year; Life and Food in an Italian Valley*, kept a kindly eye on us.

Some thirty years ago, while we were on an unusual winter stay at the house one cold but sunny morning, there came the sound of a tractor and then a knock at our old front door. There stood Orlando Cerotti, wrapped in a stout woollen jacket; with a smile on his face he unloaded a large pile of wood onto the pathway and said without explanation: 'You'll have need of this tomorrow.'

We were slightly puzzled as to why he had suddenly brought us such a very abundant load of logs. All became clear the next morning when we rose to find that near two feet of snow had fallen in the night; we were, in fact, stranded on the side of the hill. Orlando, with his lifetime of experience and strong adherence to the rules of the Lunar Calendar, knew this would happen and was concerned for our safety. That winter was indeed to become unusually cold, the water that came from the spring at the edge of the forest froze in the pipe which

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had in past times been laid under the fields. Even olive trees were damaged by the severely low temperature. With our water supply blocked, life in the house became impossible in spite of the fire that roared in the vast chimney place. This was one reason which induced us to find a second place to live when reasonable weather did not oblige in the winter countryside; another was my avid curiosity about how life was really lived in a Tuscan city.

We were fortunate to find a small apartment in an ancient house in the city of Arezzo, and it was there that I began once more to learn from my new neighbours and friends about their particular cuisine and culture. This book is about the other side of the Tuscan coin, the city, nourished by its surrounding countryside by means of the produce of generations of farmers and families like that of the Cerotti's. Town and country were – and still are – indivisible.

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Even if the discourtesy of the sea, almost seeming to envy your kindness, did not consent to my seeing or enjoying the goods which you sent me and which are much to my taste; I still render you that gratitude which a soul who seeks to please a friend deserves, that generosity which is yours. But if I could have your power, which up to now I would attribute to princes, I would implore you to do justice to the extravagance of your gift and my expectations. To be angry with the inconstancy of the waves who leave in peace those who with their silks and their gold jewellery defraud the taxes but castigate those who carry cheeses and sausages for which the tax is paid. The sea should be angry with the winds which disturb it, and not with me, who is more angry than the storms with all their battles; be should be angry with the spoilers of the sausages and the cheeses which he carries. Certainly it is right to say so, because it is not the sea's fault but the fault of the winds and the way they behave that I cannot eat here the things which I can no longer eat in Rezzo, and perhaps do not need to eat away from there as their taste resides in my memories and affections. They form the flavour of my memory.

Letter from Pietro Aretino to Francesco Albergotti
Venice, 3rd November 1541

The domestic food of the Tuscan city of Arezzo is inspired by fundamental ties to its surrounding land and an ancient culinary heritage. In this book, you will find beloved recipes and opinions about food that strongly express the character of Arezzo's citizens, both past and present, plus ways of preparing

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food considered so essential to the Aretine way of life that they have been preserved throughout the city's long and often turbulent past.

The quotation above is from a letter written in 1541 by Pietro Aretino, one of Arezzo's most famed citizens, to Francesco Albergotti, a member of a distinguished Aretine family. It well illustrates the nostalgia of an Aretine for his city and his native cuisine. That feeling for home, the Aretine countryside and the produce it provides, continues to thrive.

My writing of this book was encouraged by the discovery of a collection of hand-written recipes that I found by chance in an antique shop in Arezzo. The fragile sheets of paper, I later discovered, dated from the last two decades of the nineteenth century to near the end of the First World War, and were collected by a woman called Beppina. On further study of the recipes and a comparison with some of those of the distant past, as well as many from the present day, a pattern began to emerge of what was – and largely remains – genuine Aretine food. Beppina's recipes form a link in the ancient chain of Aretine culinary tradition.

One of the underlying themes of this book is that the preparation of food is one of the chief expressions of any culture. Traditionally prepared food provides stability and identity to the individual family, as well as to the society of a region or nation. Modern Italians are the inheritors of thousands of years of civilisation of a complex order and, in turn, Italian food accurately reflects this intricate legacy. Every area of Italy has its own culinary traditions.

When you find yourself far from home never commit the error of asking for a speciality of your own birthplace. Cuisine varies from place to place because the quality of the water is different, as is the land and the pastures, but

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above all it is different because one cannot improvise a tradition that each region has conserved for itself over millennia. (*Non commettere mai l'errore trovandoti lontana dalla tua regione di chiedere una specialita della tua terra. La cucina varia da luogo a luogo perche varia la qualita dell'acqua, varia il terreno, varian le pasture, ma soprattutto varia perche non s'improvvisa una tradizione che ogni luogo conserva da millenni.*)
Arnoldo Miniati. Florence 1971

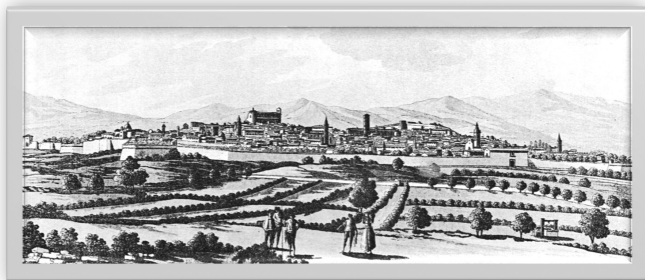
These myriad local dishes, which are nevertheless all Italian, are, as is intimated in the quotation above, the product of the diverse geographies and climates of Italy, which in turn define the type of agriculture possible in a particular area. They are also the result of the markedly different dispositions of Italians living in diverse parts of the peninsula, all with their local predilections, attitudes, pride in and love for their birthplaces, and their particular histories. The food of Italy was and yet remains an intense and delicate mosaic that cannot be reduced to simplicities.

Italians – and the Aretines are no exception – are still passionate about their food; they habitually talk about it and its preparation. To discuss food is both a *divertimento* and a demonstration of one's own particular cultural inheritance, something of which to be proud.

During my years in Italy, I have observed the influence of the modern food industry on the culinary habits of urban Italians. International manufacturers, giant supermarkets and the publicity that they generate in the mass media, plus price cutting, have all had an effect.

Fortunately, this industrial onslaught on traditional local produce and cookery has long been recognized and is vigorously questioned. Some of the strongest opponents of industrial food in the city of Arezzo are Aretine women who fiercely defend their ways of preparing food, those rules and

methods which they have inherited from their forebears. Then there are movements such as the Coldiretti, the Association of Farmers, whose aim it is to protect both traditional Italian agriculture and genuine regional food. On each Wednesday morning, organised by the Coldiretti, a group of local farmers bring their fruit and vegetables, and together with local producers of cheese, bread, preserved meats and honey gather in the lower reaches of the town to sell their excellent produce. Added to this, there is the strong presence in Tuscany of the now world famous 'Slow Food' movement, founded by Carlo Petrini, whose headquarters is in Bra in Piedmont. Slow Food aims to preserve the cultural heritage of local cuisines along with their associated plants, seeds and farm animals. The very latest fresh food enterprise in Arezzo, however, is a market which was opened in December 2015 in the historic Logge del Grano, where in the past grain was sold. Here one can buy traditional produce of excellent quality, for example, *Abbucciato Aretino*, a *pecorino* cheese made from unpasteurised sheep's milk, a cheese good enough to meet the sternest standards of Aretine women. The name *Abbucciato* comes from the old word to darken, as this cheese when matured grows a thin dark skin. Due to the unaltered quality of the milk, its flavour, gentle,



The walled city of Arezzo in the early nineteenth century when it was still surrounded by fields.

creamy but with a hint of bitter sweet dry leaves, is redolent of the mountain herbage on which the sheep have grazed. Its origins are extremely ancient, in the eleventh century there is mention of it in documents written by the monks of Camaldoli who received it from its makers, the hermits of the nearby and famed Casentino valley. In Le Logge del Grano there is, too, an abundant choice of locally made foods, olive oils, fresh vegetables and rare fruits like the *mela roggia*, a delicious apple, anciently grown in the Tiber Valley.

Despite the activities of the modern food industry, if Beppina, one of the inspirations of this book, were to miraculously reappear in Arezzo today, she would still recognise some of the shops in the *centro storico*, and many of the goods that they sell – but she would have to walk outside the city walls to visit the market, where the vegetables would be larger than she remembered, and doubtless she would be overwhelmed by the confusion of roads and industrial estates which now cover the verdant fields of her day. Happily though, in countless households, she would still be able to sit down for dinner and recognize dishes that were served at her own table: dishes like *Fegatelli*, parcels of liver perfumed with wild fennel flowers, *Arista*, roast loin of pork spiced with garlic, nutmeg and cloves, *Pappardelle alla Lepre*, home-made pasta dressed with a hare sauce, *Fagioli di Sant'Anna*, green beans cooked with *pancetta* (salt cured pork belly often cut into cubes) and tomatoes, savoury *Frittata*, a slowly cooked egg dish, much like the Middle Eastern *eggab* filled with diverse ingredients such as wild asparagus, zucchini, spinach, *pecorino* cheese and all manner of herbs.

Although the exact taste of a piece of meat might differ from era to era, because of the fodder that a pig, a lamb or a chicken might have habitually been fed and the manner in which the flesh, once slaughtered, was stored and for what length of time, the inherent characteristics, the biochemistry of the various

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meats, remain unaltered and recognizable in these recipes, which have been transmitted through the years – and in some cases centuries. The method of preparation of many dishes has remained much the same, too. These are treasured recipes made with genuine ingredients that have provided both sustenance and pleasure to the people of Arezzo.

Bearing in mind the influences of the modern food industry even in a conservative Italy, I have in this book observed the characteristic tradition of domestic cooking in Arezzo, viewing it as a genuine manifestation of culture. I have compared currently popular recipes with those of Aretine cooks of previous centuries. I have listened to conversations around me in groceries and heard echoes of the nineteenth century, seen what has remained constant in the Aretine kitchen for hundreds of years, what has evolved and what, under the pressure of our increasingly industrialised, globalised and regulated world, is changing.

The food of Arezzo has been shaped by the agriculture of its surrounding countryside in times of plenty and of famine, by historical events, religion, war, occupation, politics and fashion. However, it still clearly expresses the essential culture of this Tuscan hill town. Here there is a respect for the quality and purity of the ingredients, the simplicity with which they are traditionally handled and the spare elegance of the resulting dishes: plain food, good enough to stand up for itself without unnecessary adornment. *Senza fronzoli* ('No frills') as the Aretines, themselves, would say!

And to quote again one of the greatest of Arezzo's citizens, Pietro Aretino, who wrote as well about food as he did about other pleasures, he too was an advocate and forbear of this Aretine notion of simplicity:

Regarding he who laughs at me for eating such simple

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and rustic food, one laughs more at his boasting of feeding on regal fare, tell him, nay, swear to him, that it is true that he eats better than me, but I will live longer than he, because death is the cook of elaborate food, life is the cook of that which is simple. (*Se colui che si e riso nel vedermi mangiare cose si roze e cosi rustiche, se ne ride piu con il vantarsi del suo pascersi di vivande regie, ditegli, anzi giurategli, che in vero egli mangia meglio di me, ma ch'io vivero piu di lui, imperoche de I cibi delicati e cuoca la morte, e dei semplici la vita.*)

Pietro Aretino Venice, August, M.D.XLVIII
Letter 538, Book 5



Pietro Aretino.