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Mediterranean Pathways, Exotic Flora, Fauna, and Food in Renaissance Ferrara

Diane Ghirardo

On September 27, 1475, Galeazzo Maria Sforza of Milan informed the ambassador of Duke Ercole I d'Este of Ferrara that he would send him twelve sacks of a new plant so abundant in its produce that it could feed several times the number of people of a comparable amount of grain. The following day, Sforza dispatched an envoy carrying the authorization to remove the precious and exotic cargo from the duchy of Milan. Sforza had already been experimenting with this unusual and new foodstuff at his estate near Vigevano, a cereal we know today as rice. Ercole evidently planted it promptly, for by the end of the century, the prices of this grain in the city's markets were being quoted by chroniclers, and by the early sixteenth century, it had become a staple in the daily diet of both commoners and royalty.¹

Both Lombardy and the Ferrarese countryside subsequently became centers of rice production in Italy. Sforza's experiments at Vigevano dated at least to 1472, but how did the grain come into *his* hands? No specific record has yet been found to document the arrival of rice in Milan, but at the time, there were only two possible sources. The first was Africa, especially the region of the Gambia; Portuguese traders first brought rice to the Iberian Peninsula, from where it spread to the rest of the Mediterranean.² The second possible origin was the Far East, also the source of the spices that had enlivened the taste of European dishes throughout the Middle Ages. In that case, while there were also overland routes, such artifacts from the Far East usually funneled through the Egyptian port of Alexandria to the Mediterranean.

Like other exotic foods, animals, and spices, rice was especially prized not only because of its abundant yield, but because it was new and rare; it therefore initially served primarily to testify to the magnificence and stature of the man who possessed it. This essay explores the ways the Ferrarese court exploited unusual or difficult to obtain flora and fauna from around the Mediterranean basin and beyond, in service of an ongoing dialog about power with other courts and with their Ferrarese subjects.

Throughout the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, fascination with the rare, the novel, the exotic, grew at the courts of the Este dukes and elsewhere. Ercole owned a pet parrot – probably of African origin and likely inherited from his father, Nicolò III d'Este – until his death, when it was bequeathed to his daughter-in-law Lucrezia Borgia. She tended the bird for a few years, eventually turning it over to the nuns at the Ferrarese convent of Sant'Antonio in Polesine while continuing to pay for its upkeep (parrots having notably long lifespans). Lions, tigers, bears, cheetahs, and other non-native species roamed the ducal retreat at Belfiore and the Barco to the north of the city, and

¹ See Clifford A. Wright, "A History of Rice in the Mediterranean," www.cliffordawright.com/history/rice.html. Accessed May 19, 2009.

² Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

Ercole even contemplated purchasing elephants to round out his collection.³ Nobles doted on such exotic animals beyond the confines of Ferrara; Ercole's illegitimate daughter Lucrezia married Annibale, scion of the Bentivoglio family of Bologna, whose emblem was a seated cheetah.⁴



Fig. 1. Rocca dei Bentivoglio, Bazzano (Bologna), Sala dei Ghepardi, Detail, Cheetah with motto "Per amor tuto benvolgo soferire," fresco, 15th century (photo: Diane Ghirardo)

Exotic, rare, and thus costly: such were the hallmarks of the court's pursuit of magnificence and stature among other Italian and European courts.⁵ The acquisitions included not only rare animals, plants, and foods, but also human beings: Isabella d'Este wrote to her agent in Venice requesting a four- or five-year-old black slave girl, as black as possible, she specified, to bring to her court in Mantua, just as the mistress or secret wife of Alfonso I d'Este, Laura Dianti, must have done to acquire the black page represented next to her in the famous portrait by Titian.⁶ During the early modern period, when the Italian Peninsula suffered from regular sequences of plagues and food shortages caused by wars and poor harvests, the ability to bestow on guests a lavish array of dishes, all fashioned with exquisite delicacies, came to be a signal measure of a court's strength and stability.

Scholars have studied extensively the acquisitiveness of Ercole, his daughter Isabella d'Este, and other aristocrats, particularly with respect to antiquities, contemporary art, maps, books, and manuscripts.⁷ All of those artifacts enjoyed long lifespans, could be

³ The best source for information about the Barco, and the activities and animals associated with it, is Thomas Tuohy, *Herculean Ferrara: Ercole d'Este, 1471-1505 and the Invention of a Ducal Capital* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. 342-52.

⁴ Frescoes of the cheetah seated beneath a ribbon inscribed with the motto "Per amor tuto benvolgo soferire" are still found in the Sala dei Ghepardi at the Rocca dei Bentivoglio at Bazzano.

⁵ Tuohy discusses the politics of ducal magnificence in *Herculean Ferrara*, 26-52.

⁶ Dennis Romano, *Household and Statecraft: Domestic Service in Renaissance Venice, 1400-1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996); Jane Fair Bestor, "Titian's Portrait of Laura Eustochia: The Decorum of Female Beauty and the Motif of the Black Page," *Renaissance Studies* 17:4 (December 2003), 628-73.

⁷ Paula Findlen, "Possessing the Past: The Material World of the Italian Renaissance," *The American Historical Review* 103:1 (February 1998), 83-114; for Isabella d'Este's patronage and collecting, see

displayed repeatedly to scholars and other admirers, sold to gain liquidity, or passed on to descendants – and often can be traced in inventories or account registers. The distinctive characteristic of the flora and fauna, and the food they produced, is that while they could indeed be documented, they quintessentially expressed the lavishness and luxury of the court precisely because they did *not* endure – consumed and enjoyed, their evanescent pleasures presenting first a fleeting feast for the eyes and, once ingested, for the palate, at best remaining in fond memories or described in intimate detail in letters by ambassadors from courts throughout Europe. Feast concluded, the delicacies thereafter would be replenished at enormous cost for the next banquet.

In accordance with the dictates of Aristotle and subsequent philosophers, the prince is obligated to embody and to express magnificence in everything, from buildings and celebrations to clothing and feasts. Ercole I d'Este had his own counselor, Pellegrino Prisciani, who encouraged him to produce lavish festivals both personally and in a treatise, by arguing that the noble's first order of business was to stage convivial, elaborate, and expensive banquets as devices for affirming his magnificence to other princes and of gaining greater loyalty from his subjects.⁸ Even if it meant going into debt, pawning jewels, and leaving bills unpaid sometimes for years, aristocrats throughout Italy fervently heeded these dictates as mechanisms for shoring up their status and acquiring reputations for the magnificence and *savoir faire* that seem to have been the *sine qua non* of noble stature, at least from the end of the fifteenth century forward.⁹ Reputation was in itself the currency of power, therefore acquiring a name for lavishness and the possession of the most exotic fare allowed noble courts to buttress their standing in foreign courts, and to maintain it at home by convincing subordinates that they rightfully wielded power. It is no wonder that Alfonso I, a warrior and patron of major building enterprises, personally turned his hand to ceramics, even being credited with having devised the means for producing painted ceramic tableware with a white background.¹⁰

The fauna to which my title refers is the water buffalo, which originally arrived in Italy, according to the historian Paul the Deacon in his *Historia Langobardorum*, via South Asia to Turkey by the fifth century AD, thence to the Black Sea, Hungary, and finally, in the sixth century AD, to Italy (and indeed, the water buffalo flourished in both countries). Although there is no written documentation of the buffalo in Italy for the succeeding 400 years (travelers did remark on them in the Holy Lands in the eighth century AD), they were certainly in the Balkans again by the ninth century. Another

Daniele Bini, ed. *Isabella d'Este. La primadonna del Rinascimento. Quaderno di civiltà mantovana* (Modena: Il Bulino, 2001).

⁸ D. A. Barbagli, ed., *Pellegrino Prisciani. Spectacula* (Modena: Panini, 1992); Diane Ghirardo, "Festival Bridal Entries in Renaissance Ferrara," in S. Bonnemaïson and C. Macy, eds. *Festival Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 43-73.

⁹ Some indication of the magnificence of such feasts was documented in the exhibit "Tesori alla tavola degli Este. Arredi, addobbi, manoscritti e documenti," June 12 to July 13, 2008, at the Galleria Estense in Modena.

¹⁰ Although Alfonso's predilection for manual over other arts has long been known, the most recent discussion of his inventive ceramics is by Timothy Wilson, "Le maioliche," in Franco Franceschi, Richard A. Goldthwaite, Reinhold C. Mueller, eds., *Il Rinascimento Italiano e L'Europa. Commercio e cultura mercantile* (Treviso: Angelo Colla Ed., 2007), 227-45, esp. 238.

theory for the introduction of water buffaloes into Italy credits Arabs with having brought the beast to Sicily, from whence Norman overlords introduced them into the mainland.¹¹

Whatever their origins, by the twelfth century they were abundant in the Roman *campagna* (and clearly had been for some time); they are recorded in Sicily in 1231, and in Salerno in 1239. As an animal at home in marshes, the buffalo happily populated the swamps around Salerno in the Pian del Sele, the Pontine Marshes along the Mediterranean coast between Rome and Naples, and the Maremma on the Mediterranean coast of Tuscany.¹² Despite the abundance of marshland in the Po Delta, no evidence of the presence of water buffaloes emerges until the late fifteenth century. By the 1470s, however, they were certainly in Ferrara, probably brought there from Naples by Eleonora d'Aragona in 1473 when she arrived as the bride of Ercole I.

Not only did Eleonora bring her water buffaloes, she also imported the delightful cheese she enjoyed in Naples produced from water buffalo milk. *Pasta filata* cheese originated in the Middle East but had already been transported to Italy at the latest by the thirteenth century, where it was sold in the markets of Naples, and by the fifteenth century, it also graced the table of Ferrante d'Aragona, King of Naples and Eleonora's father. When Eleonora negotiated a *soceda* contract for her water buffaloes with Pietro Nigrisolo in 1485, she agreed to pay for ricotta, but she was guaranteed as much "fresh cheese", that is, mozzarella, as she wanted.¹³ Her daughter Isabella d'Este apparently enjoyed the same cheese, for in 1502 she struggled to find a bull in Ferrara to mate with her females.¹⁴ Isabella's sister-in-law Lucrezia Borgia, wife of Alfonso I d'Este, also maintained a herd of water buffaloes, evidently for the cheese with which she must have become familiar in Rome, where even the patients in the Ospedale Santo Spirito received buffalo milk cheese. As a budding capitalist entrepreneur, Lucrezia expended large sums from her personal fortune and from her annual subsidy from the ducal court to reclaim vast tracts of land in the duchy of Ferrara, which in some cases she then populated with livestock, including water buffaloes.¹⁵ While she employed the bulk of an inheritance to purchase over 200 cattle in 1514, to pay for water buffaloes she pawned a beautiful piece of jewelry with a ruby and a round pearl in 1517.¹⁶ Although I found no evidence of a brisk trade in buffaloes between north and south, Alfonso I of Ferrara did pay the Siense banker Agostino Chigi in 1517 to ship ten buffaloes from Rome, probably partially on

¹¹ Lynn White, Jr. "Indic Elements in the Iconography of Petrarch's 'Trionfo della Morte'," *Speculum* 49:2 (April 1974), 201-21.

¹² Ferruccio Trabalzi, "Regional Networks in Southern Italy: Innovation and Adaptation in the Buffalo Mozzarella Industry," unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2002. Trabalzi documents the introduction of the animal and its cheese to Italy in considerable detail.

¹³ Archivio di Stato, Modena [ASMo], Amministrazione dei Principi [AP], Eleonora d'Aragona, b. 631b, c. 18v; for her contract with Pietro Nigrisolo, Archivio di Stato Ferrara (ASFe), Archivio Notarile Antico (ANA), matricola (m) 238, notary Bernardino Prosperi, b. 1 (1485), cc. 1rv. Until the end of the Middle Ages, goat rather than cow milk was used to produce cheese in Italy, but water buffalo cheese was certainly produced by the twelfth century.

¹⁴ Archivio di Stato, Mantova, Archivio Gonzaga, b. 2993, c. 38v, 12 November 1502, Isabella d'Este to Benedetto Brugio, cited in G. Malacarne, *Sulla Mensa del Principe. Alimentazione e banchetti alla Corte dei Gonzaga* (Modena: Il Bulino, 2000), 106-07.

¹⁵ Ghirardo, "Lucrezia Borgia as Entrepreneur," *Renaissance Quarterly* 61 (2008), 53-91.

¹⁶ ASMo, AE, AP, Lucrezia Borgia, b. 1139 (1516-1519), c. 41v, 24 September 1517.

waterways and partly on land.¹⁷ This may well have been the same herd Lucrezia purchased that very year, since the dates coincide and there is no evidence Alfonso himself maintained a herd. Even if they began to appear in the Po Delta, water buffaloes remained sufficiently exotic to be contrasted with elephants in Lorenzo Costa's pictorial cycle for the Bentivoglio family chapel in the Church of S. Giacomo Maggiore in Bologna (1488-1490?).¹⁸ In *The Triumph of Fame*, Costa depicted elephants bearing those who acquired enduring fame, but in the companion piece, *The Triumph of Death*, two water buffaloes carry the skeletons representing human mortality.

Both the cheese of the water buffalo and rice entered into the life of the Este court, mingling with other foodstuffs and recipes from throughout the Mediterranean. Some measure of the status of Ferrara and the lavish feasts arranged by the Este is the unusually large number of treatises having to do with cooking published in the city over the course of the sixteenth century.¹⁹

The first, and the first dedicated solely to the art of carving meat, by Francesco Colle, appeared in 1520.²⁰

The greatest culinary innovator in Ferrara was the *scalco* Cristoforo da Messisbugo, who recorded his recipes and the courses at several of the banquets he organized in his book, *Banchetti Composizioni di Vivande e apparecchio generale*. Published posthumously in 1549, *Banchetti* documented banquets he prepared over the quarter century of his employment first by Duke Alfonso I and then by Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este, patron of the estate Villa d'Este at Tivoli and son of Lucrezia Borgia and Alfonso I d'Este.²¹ A third major treatise on the art of cooking published in Ferrara appeared in

¹⁷ Alfonso paid for the "conduto da roma [from the sienese banker Agostino Chigi] al prefato n. signore diece bufale." ASMo, AE, Computisteria, Memoriale, b. 55, (1517) c. 23. These may have been the water buffaloes for which Lucrezia had pawned her jewelry, since the dates coincide and there is no other indication that Alfonso himself maintained a herd of buffaloes. Chigi was also a longstanding close friend of Lucrezia's, so it would not have been unreasonable for her to turn to him to acquire water buffaloes. See Gabriella Zari, *La Religione di Lucrezia Borgia. Le lettere inedite del confessore* (Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 2006), 309.

¹⁸ Jaynie Anderson, "The Rediscovery of Ferrarese Renaissance Painting in the Risorgimento," *The Burlington Magazine* 135:1085 (August 1993), 539-49.

¹⁹ The bibliography on the history of foods and foodstuffs in Italy is extensive, but two recent important texts are *Atlante dei prodotti tipici. La pasta* (Rome: Istituto Nazionale di Sociologia Rurale, 2004), and Massimo Montanari and Alberto Capatti, *La cucina italiana. Storia di una cultura* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2006).

²⁰ Francesco Colle, *Rifugio de povero gentilomo* (Ferrara: Lorenzo de Russi, June 9, 1520).

²¹ Cristoforo da Messisbugo, *Banchetti, Composizioni di Vivande e Apparecchio Generale* (Ferrara: Giovanni De Buglhat and Antonio Hucher, 1549), reprint edited by Fernando Bandini (Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, II ed. 1992); several editions appeared in Venice after 1552, one of which was reprinted recently, with the more extensive title *Libro Novo nel qual sinsegna a' far d'ogni sorte di vivanda secondo la diversità de I tempo, così di carne come di pesce* (Venice: 1557, reprint Arnaldo Forni, 1982); see also Luciano Chiappini, *La Corte Estense alla metà del Cinquecento. I compendi di Cristoforo di Messisbugo* (Ferrara: Belriguardo 1984); Arianna Chendi, *Erbe ed erbari a Ferrara dal '400 ai giorni nostri* (Comune di Ferrara: Ferrara, 2000). All of the following information on recipes are drawn from Messisbugo's treatise. Much discussion has surrounded his unusual name, with some holding that his family arrived from the north, but in the early fourteenth century there was already a record of the surname Sbugo; Luciano Chiappini, *La corte estense allá meta del Cinquecento. I compendi di Cristoforo di Messisbugo* (Ferrara: S.A.T.E., 1984).

1584, Giovan Battista Rossetti's *Dello Scalco*.²² Like Messisbugo, Rossetti documented both the recipes he utilized and the banquets he supervised, including those in celebration of the marriage of Alfonso II d'Este to Lucrezia de' Medici in 1560.²³ Even though the banquet commissioned by Cardinal Luigi d'Este for the marriage of Duke Alfonso II d'Este to his second wife, Barbara d'Austria, in December 1565 was canceled due to the unexpected death of Pope Pius IV and the prompt departure of the host to join the conclave, his *scalco* Giacomo Grana recounted the preparations for the feast in exquisite detail, as if it had actually taken place as scheduled in the Palazzo dei Diamanti.²⁴

Ferrara's earliest comprehensive treatise on matters culinary, that of Messisbugo, spelled out the provisions and staff necessary for a well-stocked larder, as well as the recipes he had devised or adapted during his tenure in Ferrara. On May 20, 1529, for example, a banquet based on fish at the ducal estate of Belfiore in honor of Ercole II d'Este and his bride Renata di Francia, included seventeen courses plus confetti. Messisbugo describes not only the settings of the tables and the decorations, but the entertainments organized in the intervals between courses. Messisbugo is credited with inventing and exploiting multiple versions of *paste sfoglie*, or puff pastry for Ferrara's famous *pasticcio* and various tortelli, such as the "Tortelletti" he described in *Banchetti* with a filling of spinach, oil, 300 grams of sugar and an ounce of cinnamon, 7.5 grams of pepper, 150 grams of strained grape pulp, 15 ground nuts, 150 grams of finely chopped dry figs, all sealed together in pasta rounds then fried and served in sugar and honey.

Such rich treats graced the ducal table only on special occasions. Documents from the Este archives in Modena illustrate the fairly simple daily diet even of aristocrats in the first half of the sixteenth century: salad, fruit, ricotta, butter, milk, oranges, sausage, rice, salted meat, veal, beef, seasoned cheeses and *grana*, bread and cakes, with such condiments as salt, vinegar, and oil, all varying according to the age and status of the individual.²⁵ Special events, major celebrations such as weddings, feast days, or the visits of dignitaries triggered far more elaborate fare. It was on these occasions that the abundance of spices, special foods, and exotic recipes to which the Este laid claim could be displayed and offered to visitors with grand effect. For several centuries after the fall of Rome, spices disappeared from Europe, but they reemerged via the port of Alexandria (Egypt) by about the tenth century, at that time being used largely for medicinal purposes and distributed throughout Italy and elsewhere in Europe from centers located in Salerno, Pavia, and Venice. From the bark, root, gum, resins, and seeds of trees in the tropics came pepper (India), cloves and nutmeg (currently obtained from Zanzibar, but originally from the Molucca Islands), cinnamon (Sri Lanka), ginger (China).²⁶ Italian traders channeled them through Alexandria from whence they sailed to Venice for subsequent distribution to the mainland. Also through Venice came refined sugar, a luxury imported

²² Giovan Battista Rossetti, *Dello Scalco* (Ferrara: Mammarcello, 1584).

²³ Rossetti, "Banchetto e cena, che per questa occasione con gli istessi Principi fece l'illustrissimo Sig. Cornelio Bentivoglio," *Dello Scalco*, 135; reproduced in Claudio Benporat, *Cucina e convivialità italiana del cinquecento* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2006), 253-56. See also Claudio Paolini, *A tavola nel rinascimento. Luoghi, arredi e comportamenti* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2007).

²⁴ Giacomo Grana, Ms, *Convito estense preparato e descritto da Giacomo Grana ferrarese* (Ferrara: Taddei, 1843); the document is republished in Benporat, *Cucina e convivialità*, 282-88.

²⁵ ASMo, AE, Significati, 1520.

²⁶ An excellent recent source on spices is Jack Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2004).

as sugar cane from Candia, on the island of Crete, then under Venetian control. The desire to sweeten dishes is no novelty; in a tradition that dated at least to ancient Sumer, people sweetened their food with honey if they were prosperous, or with fruit juices if they were commoners. Arabs were responsible for the diffusion of sugar cane throughout the Middle East (and for the delicacy marzipan, also consumed at the Este court during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), and then into the Mediterranean and Spain by the eighth century AD, but in 1390, the development of a press that doubled the yield of the sweet juice allowed for its rapid diffusion over the course of the next century. Long used exclusively as a drug or in dishes composed for the sick, in the fifteenth century sugar began to be cultivated in Candia and Sicily, thereby increasing its availability and rendering it more affordable than it had been when imported from India or Arabia. Not only did sugar remain an essential element in pharmacies, but it also began to be commonly adopted for cooking in noble houses (and not only for the sick). In his *De honesta voluptate*, published in Venice in 1475, Platina declared: “there is a saying that sugar never damaged meat, but rather sweetens it, making it tender and good, healthy, and agreeable to the palate.”²⁷

Factors of time and space doubled both the cost and the appeal of these delicacies, making the enjoyment exquisite: as with love, distance and difficulty are the coefficients of desire. And what happened to these luxuries once they arrived in Ferrara? For our understanding of this, we have Messisbugo’s treatise to thank, for he not only explained how tables were set and the types of decorations produced to adorn them, he also offered recipes for the dishes that Ferrara’s aristocracy and distinguished visitors enjoyed in the first half of the sixteenth century. The characteristic feature of virtually all of these dishes was the sheer abundance, indeed overabundance, of spices, including in recipes supposedly drawn from other Mediterranean countries.

Rice could be mixed with an almost infinite array of ingredients to produce dishes ranging from the bland to the sweet to the piquant. For example, a donut shaped dish called “Turkish style rice” [riso alla turchesca] was prepared with milk, sugar, butter, and salt and then abundantly draped with a mix of sugar and cinnamon. “Riso turchesco” on the other hand, contained 600 grams of rice boiled with about 750 grams of almonds ground to a fine, almost liquid, paste, and 300 grams of white sugar. For another dish, cooks boiled 300 grams of rice in beef broth (or for the Lenten version, a clear broth); when nearly cooked, the rice was blended with 300 grams of grated cheese and ten egg yolks, along with 7.5 grams of pepper and some saffron, then spread out in a pan and covered with 180 grams of sugar and a half ounce of cinnamon. Is this an early version of “Risotto alla Milanese?” I suspect that today most purists would balk at adding eggs, sugar, and cinnamon to that Lombard specialty! But such rich ingredients were never far

²⁷ Bartolomeo Sacchi [Platina], *De honesta voluptate & valitudine* (Cividale: Gerardus de Flandria, 1480), reprint Udine, Society Filologica Friuliana/Arti Grafiche Friulane, 1994; Mary Ella Milham, ed. *Platina: On right pleasure and good health. A critical edition and translation of “De honesta voluptate et valetudine* (Tempe AZ: Arizona State University Press, 1998); Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, eds. *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). For general studies of late medieval and renaissance banquets and feasts in Italy, see the three volumes by Claudio Benporat, *Cucina Italiana del Quattrocento* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1996); *Feste e Banchetti. Convivialità italiana fra tre e quattrocento* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2001), and *Cucina e convivialità italiana* (see note 22 above). Benporat reproduces numerous texts describing banquets and feasts of various sorts, as well as a range of *ricettari*.

from the Este table, and indeed, I found no rice dishes in Messisbugo's compendium which lacked either sugar or cinnamon.

Also to relieve the tedium of the Lenten diet, another almond dish contained about 900 grams of crushed almonds, 450 grams of rice flour, stirred together over a tripod and a good fire, with 30 grams of cinnamon, 15 grams of pepper, enough saffron to make it yellow, 300 grams of strained grape pulp, 150 grams of pine nuts, 10 finely chopped dates and 3 ounces of muscatel pulp. After having been cooked and placed in a pan to cool, a mix of cinnamon and sugar covered the concoction. A fish dish for Lent consisted of two 4-pound *merluzzi* cleaned and tenderized, over which was spread a *soffrito* of 450 grams of butter, small onions, herbs, and parsley, with a little water, orange juice, 12 egg yolks, 180 grams of strained grape pulp, 15 grams of cinnamon, 7 1/2 grams each of pepper and ginger, and 4 grams of cloves [garofani], then cooked slowly until ready. Soups were equally flavored with exotic spices, such as "Zuppa con pollastri," which consisted of quarters of roasted chicken placed on a layer of bread, cheese, sugar and cinnamon, then topped with sugar, grated cheese, and cinnamon, followed by another layer of the bread, cheese, sugar, and cinnamon. Broth was poured over this concoction, again with a final flourish of cheese, sugar, and cinnamon.

Probably because of the influence of Eleanora d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia on the court's culinary habits, Messisbugo also utilized dishes presumably drawn from Spain or its outposts, such as a "Formaggio alla catelana" (sic), or "Maccheroni alla napoletana," cooked in milk and served with cinnamon, sugar, and *grana* (known as parmesan cheese in the United States).²⁸ The Borgia clan hailed from a town near Valencia in Catalonia, hence the enduring appeal of Catalonian dishes in court.

Having surveyed these recipes, will it surprise the reader to learn that many varieties of fish were routinely fried with oranges, cinnamon, and sugar – sometimes all three? The records are not clear whether Messisbugo's "pastelli di ostriche," or "oyster cakes," originated in or traveled to Dalmatia, but Messisbugo's recipe mirrors that of oyster cakes typical of the entire Dalmatian coast. A batter of flour, water, and eggs with butter is formed into a round with a deep hollow in the center. The oysters are sautéed in oil with mint, thyme, parsley, and onion; mixed spices, the juice of two oranges, a handful of strained grape pulp, and two egg yolks are added in the last five minutes. The oyster mix is placed into the hollow, covered with a thin sheet of pastry, and baked. It is served hot, garnished with a paper-thin layer of lemon slices on top. The reader may well think that these dishes are *also* over the top, with the abundance, even super abundance, of sugar and spices. But their primary virtue was as vivid testimony to the wealth of the court, so rich that it could afford to season dishes with careless indifference to the cost of the ingredients. They also added zest and appeal to the otherwise relatively bland fare of daily life. Each of the spices also was linked to bodily humors, a subject which I will not open here but which also guided their use in the kitchen. Once a foodstuff became readily available – as rice did by the beginning of the sixteenth century and sugar not much later – it lost its appeal as an indicator of luxury, which then meant that its luster depended upon the addition of expensive and exotic spices or, as in the case of sugar, it had to be confectioned into impossible and useless constructions.

²⁸ Messisbugo, 40.

The food served in course after course provided only one of the culinary feats produced by Cristoforo da Messisbugo. The table decorations had to be equally elaborate and equally wasteful of precious and expensive ingredients. Table-sized towers and castles were carefully erected of bricks fabricated with flour, eggs, sugar, butter, and saffron fried in oil or butter, drained, and fried again in honey so that they would stick together. Figures of Venus, Bacchus, and Cupid were crafted of sugar, then painted and gilded, such as at the feast for Ercole II and Renata in 1529, while musicians on trombones, the lute, harp, and flute serenaded diners. Between courses, architects and artists staged elaborate pageants, and dancers performed Spanish dances. These sophisticated visual and musical feasts served as preludes to the even more intricate dining experiences for which they then also served as *contorni* and which differed so dramatically from everyday dining. Concocting painted and gilded table decorations out of expensive sugar quintessentially expressed the magnificence and lavish waste required for a prominent ducal family in the middle of the sixteenth century. Likewise, the dishes were presented with aplomb, elegance, and skill in stylized fashion, such as the complicated process of cutting and serving meat dishes. The carver wielded knives to slice and serve the meat according to a hierarchy corresponding to the status of the diner, and all had to be done with economy and elegance of movement.²⁹

Counterpoint to the ducal banquets of stunning lavishness were the struggles of ordinary Ferrarese citizens to nourish themselves and their families. As part of the lavish festivities organized in honor of Lucrezia Borgia's arrival in Ferrara as future duchess and spouse of Alfonso I d'Este in February 1502, her father-in-law Ercole I d'Este staged several Roman comedies.³⁰ Venetian diarist Marino Sanudo tells us that a variety of short musical interludes and sketches enlivened the intervals between the acts.³¹ On February 7, during an intermission in the performance of Plautus' *Asinara* a scene representing agriculture was staged in which twelve farmers plowed, sowed, and harvest grains.³² At the conclusion of their labors, the farmers danced away to pipe music. In the context of carnival celebrations leading up to Lent and celebrating the marriage, this charming vignette served as a lighthearted reminder of those whose labor allowed the Este court to feed itself and its guests. Although poeticizing the rigors and complexities of agricultural

²⁹ It is therefore no surprise that the first treatise dedicated to the art of carving came from Ferrara, Colle's treatise *Refugio de povero gentilhomo*.

³⁰ Virtually every diarist and chronicler then active in Ferrara described Lucrezia's arrival, the celebrations organized by Ercole, and her dowry. See Bernardino Zambotto, *Diario ferrarese dall'anno 1476 sino al 1504*, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, 24, vv, 2, ed. Giuseppe Pardi (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1934), 312-38, including an account drafted by Nicolao Cagnolo, ambassador to the King of France; Anon., *Diario ferrarese dall'anno 1409 sino al 1502 di autori incerti*, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, 24, vii, I, ed. Giuseppe Pardi (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1928), 274-77, 280-85. For a general history of the Este family, Luciano Chiappini, *Gli Estensi. Mille anni di storia* (Ferrara: Corbo, 2001).

³¹ Marino Sanudo, *I Diarii di Marino Sanudo*, ed. Nicolò Barozzi (Venice: Tipografia del Commercio di Marco Visentin, 1879-1902), Tomo IV, 222-30.

³² Sanudo, *I Diarii*, 229. He describes the vignette as follows: "Poi segui a sono di tamburino XII contadini, quali representorno tutti la agricultura. Prima con zape zaporno la terra, poi, con cisti, pieni di oro stagnolo, minutissimamente tagliato, la seminorno, ultra questo con li messore si dederò a medere la biava, seguendo de grado in grado, batendola et accogliendola, fin tanto che ussirno alcune contadine con fiaschi, cesti et lavezi coperti, quali gli portavano da manzare con le pive inanzi. Dove gionte a loro, li contadini, disposti li instrumenti loro, cominziorno con esse, a sono de quelle pive, a balare sopra la scena, et cossi balando ne ussirno; dandosi fine a la festa circha a le 4 hore di nocte, ne le quale ogniuno si redusse a cena."

labor, the scene also illustrated the centrality of bountiful harvests to the state's welfare. This did not by any means suggest any deep understanding of how the court's subjects lived, however.

Even though we have seen that the daily fare of courtiers was far more sober, that of the general population was even more so. Fava beans, wheat, and barley, along with oil and wine, were the staples available in varying quantities and quality depending on the success of the year's crops, but as the fifteenth-century chronicler Ugo Caleffini noted in 1494, "Meat and fish [were] expensive as usual."³³ In times of scarcity, rulers required that breads be made of mixed grains rather than wheat alone, and of course, fishing required a ducal license and strict penalties forbade poaching.³⁴ In the countryside, farmers also raised pigs and chickens, the former for sausage, the latter for eggs, but at times the salt necessary for the preservation of meats simply was not available; for most families, meat of any sort was a rarity.³⁵ Throughout the sixteenth century, chroniclers regularly noted the difficulty of providing adequate supplies of food as a result of poor harvests, floods, wars, and pestilence, all of which was complicated yet further by the gradual acquisition of rural land by urban elites over the course of the century.³⁶ When necessary, rulers were not averse to requiring farmers to kill most of their livestock and preserve the meat.³⁷ Such shortages and drastic measures seem never to have interrupted the steady round of banquets and celebrations in the ducal court.

All of this is, of course, the premise and the basis for the particular constellation of colonialism and capitalism that dominated not only the sixteenth century, but the centuries that followed, including our own. Grasping control of the production of precious spices for elite tables was the explicit motive for the excursions that led to the discovery of the New World. Whatever their other merits, these voyages ended up violating and transforming flora, fauna, peoples, and cultures throughout the planet. No longer content to depend upon wily traders to bring home the goods, dukes, princes, kings, and popes sought to acquire and dominate the spaces themselves, with the cartography of paternalistic and sexist dominion concealed beneath an apparently neutral discourse of civilization and religion.

It is no accident, then, that the last great addition to Ferrarese cuisine came from the New World via Spain by about 1578: chocolate. It took a while for Europeans to figure out what to do with this dark, bitter substance, but by the end of the century, legend has it that nuns in one of Ferrara's convents had invented "Panpepato," the dense chocolate cake for which Ferrara is famous. A later addition to the repertoire of Ferrarese cooks was "Tenerina," a chocolate cake made of chocolate, vanilla, eggs, butter, and a hint of flour, baked and then sprinkled with powdered sugar. "Tenerina" expresses the

³³ Ugo Caleffini, *Croniche. 1471-1494*. Deputazione Provinciale Ferrarese di Storia patria. Serie Monumenti, Vol. XVIII (Ferrara 2006), 930.

³⁴ Caleffini, 939.

³⁵ Caleffini, 941-42.

³⁶ Ghirardo, "Le bufale estensi e l'imprenditoria femminile ducale nella Ferrara del Rinascimento," in L. Scardino and M. Traina, eds. *Studi in onore di Luciano Chiappini* (Ferrara 2004), 68-85. See also Diane Ghirardo, *Le Duchesse Le Bufale e l'imprenditoria femminile nella Ferrara rinascimentale/Duchesses Water Buffaloes and Female Entrepreneurship in Renaissance Ferrara* (Ferrara: di Scaranari 2009).

³⁷ Caleffini reports that Venice so ordered the farmers Venetian territories in 1494; 939.

culmination of the lavish kitchen of late-sixteenth-century Ferrara, just before the devolution of the city to the Papacy: the correlation ratio of sugar and chocolate with its presumably aphrodisiac qualities takes us back to Messisbugo's table for a taste of the teeth rotting, girth expanding, yet fleeting pleasures of sixteenth-century Ferrara's exquisite courtly consumption.