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Sifting Out The Past

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SIFTING OUT THE PAST

*De la tria genovese per li 'nfermi. Metti la tria nel latte d'amandole
bullito, e un poco di sale, e da' a mangiare.¹*

On Genoese noodles for the sick. Place the noodles in boiling
almond milk, add a little salt, and give to eat.

If the past is like a foreign country, just imagine the possibilities for exploring it, tasting exotic new cuisines. You can do just that with old cookbooks. Although historic recipes can be terse, without cooking times, temperatures, or precise instructions, they can be cooked without adaptation and without losing the spirit of the original.

This simple recipe is a good entry point for appreciating medieval Italian cuisine. The intriguingly short recipe appeared in a manuscript cookbook from the late fourteenth century. The language suggests it hails from Tuscany, so the unknown author is Anonimo Toscano. To approach this and other historical recipes: consider the authorship, projected audience, who would have been able to read it, and the social setting of its preparation and consumption.

Start with the language. The word *tria*, noodles, has a fascinating etymology. It seems to come from the Arabic *itriyya*, which ultimately comes from the Greek *itryon*. Whether all these ancestor words meant noodles is unknown. Equally confusing, the word *tria*, or trills, also referred to laces, which are exactly what noodles look like. Why they are considered Genoese might be a thread to follow; the association of Genoa with long noodles is corroborated by an even older text in Latin, the *Liber de coquina*, where they are called *Tria lanuensis* — a Latinized form of the city's name.² The supposed route of diffusion of Genoese long noodles was between Muslim Sicily, where they were introduced in the early Middle Ages, to Genoa,

which had a lively trade with Sicily.³ When the Venetian Marco Polo went to China, he remarked that the Chinese have noodles just like ours.

Almond milk is an intriguing ingredient. It is the ancestor of what you can buy in the supermarket today. This almond milk was primarily used as a dairy substitute for Lent. On fast days, meat and any product derived from animals were banned in the interest of penitence. Physicians also contended that almond milk is easily digested and nourishing, hence the logic of serving it to the sick who need an easily assimilated form of nutrition. These are all legitimate ways to interpret the recipe — by reading between the lines, teasing out contextual clues, and looking in contemporary sources. But I would rather cook it.

This means, despite the lack of detailed instructions and measurements, mustering everything one can reasonably surmise about cooking procedures in the past, and then sticking to them without shortcuts. I imagine I could just open a box of spaghetti and boil it in store-bought almond milk. But were extrusion machines available in the fourteenth century? Probably not. The earliest recorded screw press devices, called *torchio*, don't appear until the sixteenth century. Did they have durum semolina? Possibly. Would their almond milk have additives and fillers and sweeteners? I doubt it. To truly learn about the past, making this recipe from scratch and cooking it as closely as possible with medieval cookware is the way to proceed.

First, one can glean from other medieval texts that, to



make almond milk, the almonds must be raw and blanched to remove the skins. This word did not mean submerging in boiling water as it does today, but soaking in water overnight, after which the skins come off easily and the almonds are dazzling white. The almonds are then pounded in hot water in a mortar, left to soak for a few hours, and then strained through a sturdy cloth. The end product looks, smells, and tastes exactly like milk. It even behaves like milk and can be used to make almond cheese and butter.

The recipe is silent about how to make the noodles, but it seems reasonable to assume they are made by hand and, because they resemble laces, are something like modern fettucine or tagliatelle made from fresh dough. It doesn't specify dried pasta, though that did exist at the time and was traded. In central Italy before the Industrial Era, however, dried semolina pasta was relatively unusual.

To make fresh pasta, assuming this is a serving for one sick person, as the recipe suggests, take one cup of flour, probably a relatively softer wheat than used today, meaning with a lower percentage of proteins, fewer glutens, and easier to roll out. If you can find Italian flour, that would be ideal, especially what's called *Tipo 00*, which is very finely milled, but

all-purpose flour wouldn't be radically different. Add one whole egg and a pinch of salt. Work the flour into the egg with a fork and, if necessary, add a little water until it comes together as a dough. On a floured board, knead the dough for about ten minutes. Let it rest for another ten to twenty minutes. Roll out the dough with a long, thin rolling pin on a well-floured board. After rolling it out as thinly as you can, roll up the dough into a long log, then cut it across into thin strips. You will need to unravel each noodle and dust it with flour so the noodles don't stick. Set the noodles aside.

Lightly salt and heat your almond milk. Ideally, you will want to use an earthenware pot on a direct flame, in a hearth over hot coals. I'm not sure it makes an enormous difference this way from the perspective of flavor, but it does give you a sense of the labor involved, which is a part of understanding the past. A regular pot on the stove, however, will work. Drop the noodles into the pot and stir. They will take about two to three minutes depending on how thinly they were rolled, or until they are fairly soft.

Serve this dish in a ceramic or wooden bowl with a spoon, nothing else. Remember, during the medieval period, forks were not yet commonly

used. If you need to cut the noodles with the edge of the spoon, that makes sense. The flavor is at once familiar because we know pasta well, but totally unusual in that the combination of wheat with almonds is rarely seen in modern pasta recipes.

Consider the effect it has on your body as you eat. The fat in the broth covers the inside of your mouth, giving it what is called in gastronomy a full mouthfeel. The noodles should be soft and easily chewed, not al dente, which is a modern preference. In fact, in the past, many pasta shapes were made with breadcrumbs precisely to make them soft. Then, feel how your body is warmed by eating them. Medieval people would have categorized this dish as hot and moist, meaning it heats our bodies and hydrates us. It also meant that it is nourishing according to standard humoral physiology, the dominant system of medicine since ancient times which posited that health was a balance between four humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. This recipe, being hot and moist,

would help generate good blood. Then, take notice of how it fills you up, not the way a large piece of meat would, but still filling. Short of eating this in an authentic setting, a curtained medieval sick bed perhaps, in costume, I think you have come very close to directly experiencing and on some level understanding the aesthetic preferences of the past.

Medieval recipes can be challenging, but delicious.⁴ Cooking and tasting historic recipes offers a direct means of understanding and appreciating the aesthetic preferences of people in the past, especially if you are able to recreate the dish without shortcuts, substitutions, or modern conveniences. With a little practice, you get used to the lack of measurements, cooking times, and specific directions. Recipes in the past were often designed to teach the apprentice chef or young householder how to cook, and they usually do so more effectively than the precisely detailed modern cookbook.

For works cited: go to www.phikappaphi.org/forum/fall2017



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