

GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



ARCHAEOLINGUA

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The Salt of Genius: Marsilio Ficino on Food, Spices, and Nutrition

VALERY REES*

How many philosophers have engaged directly with food? For some, it is not a proper subject for contemplation, because only subject to direct sensory perception and subjective judgment.¹ Even for Locke, who wrote about the vineyards and fruit trees of Montpellier, food and drink were hardly matters for philosophical speculation.² But an interest in how food is prepared need not mean a departure from philosophic standards. Shortly after a very special event held in the summer palace at Visegrád in June, 2014, I was invited to speak at the Warburg Institute about food in the thinking of a Platonic philosopher, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499).³ My experiences in the kitchens of Visegrád, helping to prepare a wedding feast with Renaissance tools and ingredients, gave a most useful perspective for this, and provided me with appropriate images (Figs. 1-5). There was also a real link between Ficino and Visegrád, in that Ficino entered into correspondence with King Matthias and his court (Fig. 6).⁴ May I record here my lasting gratitude to József Laszlovszky, who first introduced me to the palace at Visegrád in 1991 and has remained a dear friend and source of inspiration ever since.

Heavenly banquets

Ficino first wrote about feasts in his commentary on Plato's *Symposium* in 1469, known by its short title, *De amore*. In Plato's original, we learn of conversation, drinking habits, and even dancing girls, but nothing of the food served. In Ficino's commentary, food makes a minor appearance as the proper object of desire for that part of the soul which governs the life of the body.⁵ The three lower powers of the soul, taste, touch and smell, guide a person to appropriate choices of

food and drink,⁶ but these do not reach as far as the soul itself, whose food is truth, the pursuit of which is served by the three higher powers, sight, hearing and reason.⁷ It comes then as no surprise in a later section, when those who attain heaven sit down to a banquet consisting merely of courage, justice, temperance, and love.⁸

Another heavenly banquet is described in a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici on the feast of Saints Cosmas and Damian, September 27, 1476.⁹ The annual celebration had been cancelled on account of plague. He therefore tells Lorenzo to look up at the heavens where the birthday feast has not been cancelled. The banquet there consists of nectar and ambrosia, but more earthly foods are represented by the constellations—milk, fish, crab, goat, bullock, young ram, the swan, and the eagle—with other deities bringing in wine, water, grain, and game. Sweet scents from the Elysian fields perfume the proceedings.¹⁰ In this banquet, “one food is all food,” and desire is always satisfied.

Earthly banquets

In the same year, an earthly banquet was the subject of a letter to his friend Bernardo Bembo, the Venetian ambassador in Florence.¹¹ A dinner party is to be considered successful if all the parts of a man are satisfied, that is to say, both body and soul. A good dinner party will “restore spirit, delight the senses and will foster and awaken reason.” It will bring “rest from labours, release from cares and the nourishment of genius.” At such a banquet there will be “a demonstration of love and splendour,” and the guests will partake of “the food of good will, seasoning of friendship, leavening of grace, solace of life.” All these were very much in evidence at Visegrád in the summer of 2014!

* School of Economic Science, London.



► Fig. 1. Good order in the kitchen. Preparing a wedding dinner at Visegrád castle, 2014 (photo: Chris Rees)



► Fig. 2. Cleanliness and order in the hearth (Visegrád, 2014, photo: Chris Rees)

Ficino finds the Latin word *convivium* more useful than the Greek *symposium* (drinking together) because it emphasizes what he calls a “sweet communion of life,” specifying that the sharing goes beyond physical food to a sharing of the life of the mind, and a common purpose.¹² Regarding provisions, austerity is to be shunned, as it would produce more of a “dying together” than a “living together.”¹³ Extravagance is equally shunned, as it brings its own form of bondage and ruin. But misery and gloom can be countered with a smooth, clear wine.

Cleanliness and order are important (Figs. 1 and 2), and, above all, *omnia ingenii sale condiri debent*, “everything should be seasoned with the salt of genius.” He is using “genius” not in the sense of intellectual originality, but as a translation of *ingenium*, that inborn quality of a human

being that gives character, ability, and mental powers and is also nurtured by one’s own particular *genius* or guiding spirit.

Into the kitchen

To see Ficino “in the kitchen,” we must turn to his more medical works. His *Consilio contro la pestilentia* of 1478¹⁴ gives precise regulations on what to eat and drink and how to prepare it, both when trying to avoid catching the plague, in chapter 5, and for feeding a plague sufferer, in chapter 8. The latter includes a number of refreshing beverages ranging from pomegranate cordial to mixtures of rose-sugar, myrobalans (a type of cherry plum), tamarind, quince, and ground dried peach.¹⁵ He gives Gentile da Foligno’s recipe for potable silver or gold. He includes several detailed recipes for fruit syrups and encourages the reader to experiment with more, blending acidity and sweetness. Solid food should be little and light, moist and nutritious, as taught by Rhazes and Avicenna.

Chapter 5, describing foods for warding off infection, allows a wider range of ingredients, and traditional rules are sometimes relaxed. For example, fish has often been banned, but it may be used if it comes from clear, running streams, and can be fried, salted, and served with *agresto* (a purée of nuts, parsley, basil, verjuice, salt, and oil), or with orange, salt, and cinnamon. Ancient authorities need not be followed blindly, as they often wrote for climates very different from that of Italy.¹⁶ Nevertheless, many vegetables are rejected here, but some fruits are allowed which other authors reject. He speaks of various ways of preparing fowl with sour and cooling herbs, just as we prepared it for the wedding feast at Visegrád – in that case with sour cherries and a sauce close to Ficino’s *agresto* (Fig. 3).

Later views

In his later work, *De vita*, we can read more general dietary advice, and further recipes.¹⁷ Book I starts from the premise that health of mind is as important as bodily health, and he addresses especially the factors that increase melancholy. Chapter 10 is replete with warnings, against hard, dry, burnt, stale, salted or fried food; beef,



► Fig. 3. Preparing capon with sour cherries and agresto (Visegrád, 2014, photo: Chris Rees)



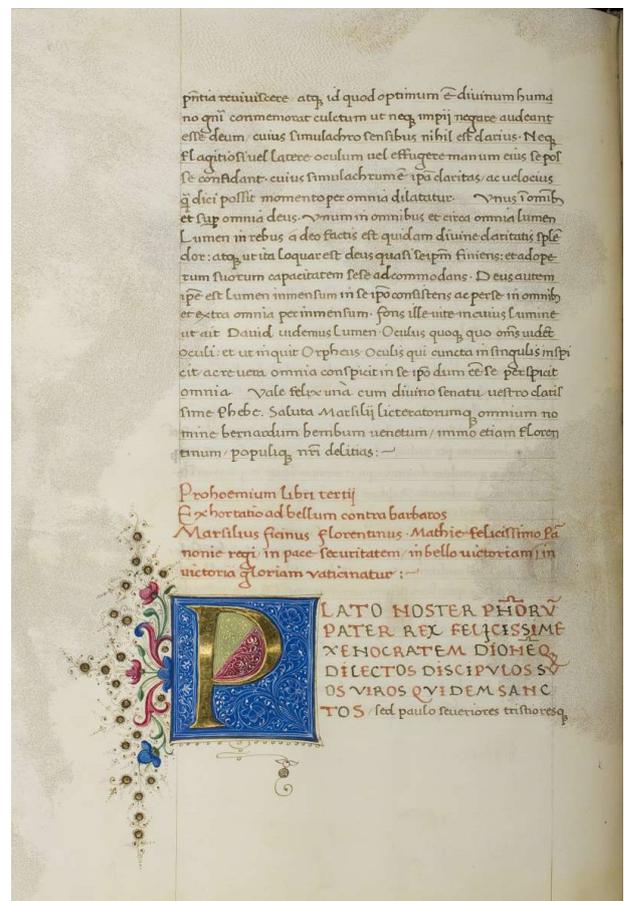
► Fig. 4. Well balanced, light, herb dumplings (Visegrád, 2014, photo: Chris Rees)

old cheese, pickles, and a whole range of vegetables. But equally harmful are psychological factors – anger, fear, pity, sorrow, idleness, or being in the dark. Aware that he has placed many restrictions on diet, he works out ways to satisfy the stomach within these restrictions. Chapter 11 advocates eating just twice a day, and only when hungry, and various things are suggested as aids to digestion, of which myrobalans are the best.

Book II of *De vita* is based on a famous medical work, the *De conservanda iuventute et retardanda senectute* of Arnald of Villanova. Or so Ficino thought. He may instead have been reading a copy of Roger Bacon's *De retardatione accidentium senectutis*—included without identification in a volume of Arnaldo. Either way, the dietary advice is clear. It is based on the concept of *euchima*, wholesome foods that impart good nour-



► Fig. 5. Vegetables and herbs appropriate to the time (Visegrád, 2014, photo: Chris Rees)



► Fig. 6. A page from Marsilius Ficinus, *Epistolarum ad amicos libri III–IV*, 1481–1482. Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 73 Aug. 2° (© HAB), <http://diglib.hab.de/mss/73-aug-2f/start.htm>, accessed October 24, 2018.

ishment and allow a good humoral balance to the blood (Figs. 4 and 5). Chapters 5 and 6 relate especially to diet. In chapter 6, he brings in the idea of cutting out meat altogether, on the authority of Porphyry and the Pythagoreans. He asks, “Have we not heard that people before the flood lived a

long time and left their animals alone?” Ficino is coming closer to vegetarianism, but he specifically permits a variety of animal foods later in the chapter. Chapter 7 also opens with the requirement that “all the animals which come under our keeping must be nourished with fine and choice foods before we eat them.”¹⁸

In Book III of *De vita*, which was dedicated to King Matthias, many of the fruits and foods that have been spoken of are linked to planetary influences of a Proclan type, though not always in obvious ways. Sweetness may be related to Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, or the Sun. Gold, saffron, and the cock are unequivocally solar, and pigeons are of Venus. But ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, and fennel may be solar or Jovian, and so on (III.11). To follow the details of Ficino’s Proclan and Plotinian theory in this book takes us back out of the kitchen and into the *studiolo*.

Essentially, by the 1480s, Ficino seems to have fully merged his original interests in medicine with his years of work as a philosopher; besides the plague treatise and the three books *On Life* we also glimpse him in his letters offering advice on health and well-being, even though he turned down a chance to translate Hippocrates because his own work as a priest, philosopher, and physician was so demanding.¹⁹ He did not have to cook his own suppers, but he certainly understood food from a practical as well as a theoretical point of view. Within his philosophical framework, the soul requires no corporeal food, but it does take care of the body and is in no way tainted by paying attention to the proper means of doing so.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, section 9.
- ² John Locke, *Observations upon the Growth and Culture of Vines and Olives; The Production of Silk; the Preservation of Fruits* (London: W. Sandby, 1766), published by the Shaftesbury family long after Locke’s death in 1704.
- ³ This contribution is a shortened version of the paper I presented there, by kind invitation of Guido Giglioli and Cecilia Muratori.
- ⁴ I have written elsewhere on Ficino’s connections with King Matthias, most recently: Valery Rees, “Buda as a centre of Renaissance and Humanism,” in *Medieval Buda in Context*, ed. Balázs Nagy, Martyn Rady, Katalin Szende, and András Vadas (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 472–493.
- ⁵ Ficino, *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis De amore*, VI, 1 (hereafter: Ficino, *De amore*). A copy of this work was sent to Janus Pannonius in 1469. For a good edition of the Latin text, see Pierre Laurens, *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon, De l’ amour* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012) or Dilwyn Knox, *De amore* (forthcoming, Harvard University Press).
- ⁶ Ficino, *De amore*, III, 3.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, V, 2.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, 6.
- ⁹ Third-century physicians and martyrs, Saints Cosmas and Damian were honored by the Medici family.
- ¹⁰ *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. members of the School of Economic Science (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975), 10 vols. to date, vol. 2, Letter 15 (hereafter: Ficino, *Letters*).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, Letter 42.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, Letter 39. Cf. Cicero, *De senectute*, xiii, 45.
- ¹³ When commenting later on the passage prescribing austerity for Plato’s guardians (*Republic*, II, 372), Ficino makes no remark beyond calling it a life that is “healthy and adequate;” see Arthur Farndell, *When Philosophers Rule* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2009), 10.
- ¹⁴ Teodoro Katinis, *Medicina e filosofia in Marsilio Ficino: il Consilio contro la pestilentia* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007) (hereafter: *Consilio contro la pestilentia*).
- ¹⁵ *Consilio contro la pestilentia*, 187.
- ¹⁶ *Consilio contro la pestilentia*, 165–166.
- ¹⁷ Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, ed. C. V. Kaske and J. R. Clark (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1989), hereafter *De vita*.
- ¹⁸ *De vita*, II, 7.
- ¹⁹ Ficino, *Letters*, vol. 7, 24, to Pier Leone of Spoleto.