Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe

Edited by
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Abundance and dearth, gluttony and fast are unsurprising dichotomies, often juxtaposed one to the other, and that is certainly the case in the history and literature of sixteenth-century Italy. The availability of unlimited quantities of food, as in the dreams of the Land of Cockaigne or in the Boccaccian world of Bengodi, seems to be a literary and artistic response to the fear of dearness and famine. The actual dearness and famines that periodically plagued Italy in that era might account also for the literary representation of constantly hungry peasants and servants in comedy and epic poems. But the cultural conversation is much more complicated and not limited to such simple contrasts. Other players enter the game: doctors who prescribe the right diet for perfect health, humanists who worry that a wrong diet can jeopardize their intellectual performances, preachers and fathers of the Church who condemn altogether any desire for food and warn against the sin of gluttony, cooks who want to please their patrons even on fast days and the ruling families of Italy for whom the display of luxury food is foremost a sign of their power and status. For each of these groups the perception of food could be quite different, turning on issues of culture, status, values and sensory experience. In this essay, rather than considering all these issues, I propose to start an analysis of this complex cultural process by charting the ‘decline’ of the sin of gluttony and the negative perception of the pleasures of food against the rise of a positive vision of taste; as a result, food was understood to exist in a complex relationship with the body that involved morality, discipline, pleasure and celebration.¹

¹ This article is part of a longer chapter in my book in progress on “Food Culture and the Literary Imagination in Early Modern Italy”. In earlier and different versions this article was presented at the meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Venice (8 April 2010) and at the Center for the Humanities of the University of Miami (22 April 2010). The author would like to thank Wietse de Boer, who co-organized (with Christine Göttler and Herman Roodenburg) a series of panels for the 2010 RSA meeting on “Religion and the Senses” in which an earlier and shorter version of this article was first presented. All translations unless otherwise noted are mine.
A good place to begin the study of the changing role of sense perception, in particular taste, in the early modern period is the mid-fifteenth-century gastronomic treatise *De honesta voluptate et valetudine* by the humanist Bartolomeo Sacchi, better known as Platina. In the eighth section of the book – dedicated to enhancing or restoring appetite in people who have been ill or too tired to eat – there appears an elaborate recipe for ‘eel pie’. The instructions call for cutting the eels in pieces, rolling them in flaky pastry, adding raisins, figs and several spices, including saffron, cinnamon, ginger and pepper; sprinkling everything with rose water and sugar, layering the ingredients and then deep-frying the preparation. At the end the recipe adds an innocent bit of advice: ‘When the eel pie is finally ready, serve it to your enemies because it has nothing good in it’.2 This distasteful eel pie, however, was not the only unpleasant concoction proposed by Platina; the very next recipe for fish rolls has a similar warning.3

What was wrong with these dishes, it appears, was that for Platina they tasted bad. Yet eels were seen by many as a particularly rich and tasty food. They were quite popular because they could survive out of water for days and be transported easily; and in fact, other sixteenth-century cookbooks give many recipes for preparing them.4 Platina himself in a different section of his treatise provides other, much simpler recipes for *anguille* that can be grilled, roasted and boiled.5 In prescriptive food literature, however, eels enjoyed a mixed reputation; some authors argued that they were to be avoided for health and moral reasons. Michele Savonarola, a medical doctor at the Este court in the fifteenth century and author of two food treatises, associates eels with gluttonous abbots because they were in his opinion a ‘food for gluttonous people, pleasant-tasting and agreeable’,6 and other authors list eels as a food typical of the gluttonous courtier.7 But Leonardo da Vinci put grilled eels on the table of the *Last Supper* and had no problem with that, probably because – as has recently been

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3 Platina, *On Right Pleasures* 8.52, 381.
hypothesized – he saw them served at the home of his Milanese patron, Ludovico Sforza.\(^8\) The eel example is interesting, because it suggests how the perception of a certain food could easily and completely differ from one context to another. More important yet, it turns on something relatively new and unexplored in the dietary literature of Platina’s day – the pleasure of eating, or in this case the lack of same, and the importance of the sense of taste. The association between good health and the consumption of certain foods was well known already in Greek and Arabic treatises, but Platina gave it a new meaning, adding to the picture the importance of pleasure in eating. Critics agree that the most interesting novelty in Platina’s work was exactly this, the ‘invention’ of a philosophy of taste.\(^9\)

As appears clearly in the example of these recipes, sense perception and, in this case, taste are strongly tied to a specific cultural and historical context rather than merely to biology or premodern ‘science’. In early modern Europe and Italy the contemporary notion of the five senses derived from Aristotelian philosophy; it maintained that the senses stood on a hierarchical ladder where each sense corresponded to one of the elements of the universe. In the official taxonomy of the senses in prescriptive literature, sight and hearing occupied the highest places as spiritual senses, while touch, smell and taste, considered to be animal and material senses, stood at the bottom.\(^10\) Literary and artistic representations of the senses often did not follow this hierarchy, and in particular taste and touch acquired a higher position over time. A text such as...

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\(^8\) Varriano, *Tastes and Temptations* 102–104.


\(^10\) However, some authors of medieval philosophy have argued that only the sense of taste was able to reveal the essence of things, as for example the anonymous *Summa de saporibus*, a thirteenth-century manuscript. See Burnett C., “The Superiority of ‘Taste’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 54 (1991) 230–238. See also the discussion in Montanari M., “Sapore e sapere: Il senso del gusto come strumento di conoscenza”, in Ghelli F. (ed.), *I cinque sensi (per tacere del sesto): Atti della Scuola Europea di studi comparati, Bertinoro, 28 agosto/4 settembre 2005* (Florence: 2007) 71–78.
De honesta voluptate, which enjoyed an immediate and vast success in Italy and Europe, evidenced by multiple reprints in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is a good indicator of the revolution taking place in the ‘official’ taxonomy of the senses11 – a revolution that in some way continues in the present with taste being highly valued and a fashionable object of study. This ‘revolution’, however, was neither simple nor easy. Platina, an accomplished and cosmopolitan humanist, was harshly criticized in his day and later for writing a gastronomic treatise that earned him the label of ‘glutton’ and ‘writer for epicures’.12 Nonetheless many later followed his lead, embracing the principle that what was delicious and thus rewarded the sense of taste was also good for health.

But as food historian Massimo Montanari has suggested, this so-called ‘utopia’ of the sense of taste coexisted and clashed with a significant tradition that could be traced back at least to the Fathers of the Church. This tradition taught the opposite: what tastes good cannot be good, because the corporeal pleasures of food take human beings away from the higher senses and the true life of the spirit.13 One of the most famous examples of the condemnation of the pleasures of eating in fifteenth-century Italy is in St. Bernardino’s Lenten sermons, where gluttony is linked to lust and sodomy. In one particular sermon written in 1534 St. Bernardino describes the desire of Florentine youths for partridges and capons, as well as nut pastries and marzipan, as leading them to a corrupting life of sexual pleasures.14 The link between the consumption of meat and sweets and unruly sexuality is presented as a given: ‘If you lose wisdom about spiritual things,
you lose wisdom about temporal things’. The saint’s preaching against the
wealthy Florentines represents the extreme side of a widespread religious
condemnation of culinary pleasures and the sense of taste. The regular
religious prescriptions about food centred on the prohibition of meat and
on the practice of fasting for everybody as ways of mortifying the body
and controlling its appetites. ‘Lenten days’ (giorni di magro in Italian) and
‘fat days’ alternated on the liturgical calendar and on the table. To match
the seasonal calendar with the religious calendar was a complicated busi-
ness that involved substitutions and adaptations but also contributed to
the diffusion of certain aliments: olive oil or butter took the place of lard,
and fish was prepared instead of meat. Famous cooks such as Maestro
Martino da Como learned how to deal with a quadragesimal diet invent-
ing several ‘Lenten imitation’ foods using almonds, fish and fish stock to
prepare faux ricotta and eggs. Recipe books with suggestions for the two
regimes continued to be published well into the seventeenth century but
their attitude changed: in the Scalco alla moderna by Antonio Latini fish is
presented as a refined food perfect to satisfy the most exigent palate. Only
in the introduction to the second volume of his work, in a sort of homage
to a lengthy tradition, Latini notes the added benefit of fish, a food that it
is also healthy for the spirit.

The dietetic literature that flourished in early modern Italy and Europe
complicates the picture further. Many authors seemed more interested
in discussing what types of food were good for health, how food should
conform to social class and the humoral composition of the body, or
how one should adapt it to the seasons and to the place where one lived.
In the end, the main purpose of dietetic literature was the achievement
of good health while the importance of taste and pleasure in eating was
overlooked. A rough consensus appears to have been reached in the

15 Ibid. 106. Fowl, especially partridges and capons, were believed to arouse lust because
they were seen as hot and moist. For this see Grieco A.J., “From Roosters to Cocks: Italian
Renaissance Fowl and Sexuality”, in Matthews-Grieco S. (ed.), Erotic Cultures of Renais-
sance Italy (Burlington, VT: 2010) 89–140, especially 116–117.
16 Capatti A. – Montanari M., La cucina in Italia: Storia di una cultura (Rome – Bari:
17 Parzan J., “Please Play with Your Food: An Incomplete Survey of Culinary Wonders
25–33, at 29.
18 Capatti – Montanari, La cucina italiana 87. Latini Antonio, Lo scalco alla moderna,
overo l’arte di ben disporre i conviti, 2 vols. (Naples, Parrino e Mutii: 1692–1694), vol. II,
1–3.
mid-seventeenth century: the most healthy diet was one based on moderation and frugality; the sense of taste was no longer important in choosing food. In fact, the sensual pleasure of taste was to be shunned. As has been argued, this ‘change of mood’ directed toward a strict control of the body and its appetites probably had some connection with Christian reform both Protestant and Catholic, even though only a few theorists make explicit references to religion in their writings. Yet while this ‘civilization of appetites’ was occurring in society, artistic representations and imaginative literature at much the same time went in the opposite direction, expressing an increasing fascination with the pleasure of food, the exaltation of taste and the reversal of the old hierarchy of the senses.

Perhaps the best place to start is the Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio. In the Introduction to the Third Day, the brigata of the ten narrators, looking for the perfect setting to continue their narrative journey, explore the hills around Settignano above Florence and finally find their earthly paradise. The landscape of rivers of pure water, green plants, birds singing and perfumed flowers is a hymn to the senses. In this paradise, ironically, the brigata delights in a story about finding paradise through penitence and mortification of the senses. Puccio di Ranieri, an old and religious man married to the young and beautiful Isabetta, has decided to become a ‘beato’ and seeks the advice of his friend Dom Felice, who is in love with Isabetta. Eager to have the opportunity to enjoy Isabetta without the presence of her husband, Dom Felice tells Frate Puccio to repent his sins, abstain from food and sex, and spend his nights outdoors tied to a piece of wood emulating the crucifixion. While Puccio punishes his body in order to gain paradise, Isabetta and Dom Felice find their paradise on earth with delicious food and excellent wine accompanying and enhancing the sensual pleasures of their lovemaking. The moral of the novella underlines the fact that spiritual penance and mortification of the senses do not necessarily lead foolish and sexually ineffective husbands to paradise, whereas the sensual pleasures of sex and food do. The last novella of the Second Day had already introduced the theme with the story of the old judge Riccardo da Chinzica, married to the young and beautiful

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19 Albala, Eating Right 177.
20 With the phrase ‘civilization of appetites’ I am recalling the work of Norbert Elias and Georges Lefebvre and their analysis of the ‘civilizing process’ and internalization of specific norms of behaviour.
22 The novella is the fourth told on that day.
Bartolomea, who had chosen a life of prayer, sexual abstinence and fasting over satisfying his youthful wife. When Bartolomea is kidnapped by the pirate Paganino, she is happily introduced to the pleasures of the senses and realizes what she has missed with her husband. When the old judge shows up to reclaim her, she tells him that he can keep his prayers and fasting because she has already found paradise on earth with her aptly named Paganino.

Two centuries later, the theme of the earthly paradise as a place where all the senses are pleasurably engaged emerges in several works of the Venetian dramatist and actor Angelo Beolco, better known as Ruzante. In his Dialogo facetissimo et ridiculosissimo, a short comedy written in the 1520s, Zaccarotto, the soul of one of Ruzante’s dead friends, comes back to earth and explains to the two hungry protagonists, the peasants Menego and Duozzo, how things work in the afterlife. Those who have been pious, always said their prayers, fasted and abstained from sensual pleasures, certainly went to heaven. This heaven, however, he reveals, is not a merry place: one does not eat or drink there. Instead one spends one’s time in acts of penitence, and the only joy consists in contemplating God. The already starving Menego and Duozzo, quite concerned about a paradise without food, ask Zaccarotto to describe where he is. He responds with the extraordinary revelation that there exists a second heaven, much more attractive than the first. In this happy heaven are the ‘good companions’ like himself and his other dead friends. Only cheerful and honest men who did not spend their time denying the senses with prayer and fasting may enter this paradise. There life is lived in the enjoyment of the senses: one does not have to work, food and drink are readily available, and time is spent hunting, joking with friends, listening to music, singing and playing instruments. As Zaccarotto notes, the most important requisite to enter this heaven is to have been honest workers in life, not stingy or too liberal, and most of all ‘happy men, not melancholics’. In the Ruzantian Dialogo facetissimo, the pleasures of the senses not only refine life on earth but open the way to what is clearly the better heaven. How, one wonders, did Ruzante conceive of this bizarre vision of a ‘nontheistic paradise’?

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Ruzante performed the *Dialogo facetissimo* at Fosson during ‘the year of the famine, 1528’, as the frontispiece of the edition printed in Venice in 1554 states.\(^{25}\) It was a period of great difficulty for the peasants of the Venetian republic, a situation well known to Ruzante, who worked as an administrator on the estates owned by the Venetian noble Alvise Cornaro. The *Dialogo* testifies to the way recurrent famines terrorized the population: it centres on hunger and its devastating effects on the body and mind – graphically illustrated in the conversation between Menego and Duozzo. Surprisingly, after beginning with a stark picture of starving peasants and their sufferings, the *Dialogo* winds up with the measured vision of the heaven reserved to the ‘good companions’ who were able to enjoy the life of the senses in moderation. One might expect that the *Dialogo* would have approached and resolved the theme of extreme dearth by tormenting the protagonists with fantasies of the land of Cockaigne common to the literary and artistic imagination of the European Cinquecento, but instead Ruzante opened a different and more measured cultural conversation.

He was greatly concerned about the Veneto peasants’ suffering due to the recurrent famines, and the effects of the usurers’ practices during those famines. In fact, he voiced this concern forcefully in a monologue, the *Prima Oratione*, written around 1521 to honour the new bishop of Padua, the Venetian nobleman and cardinal Marco Cornaro who had repossessed the bishopric after the war of Cambrai.\(^{26}\) The *Prima Oratione* is a facetious petition to the cardinal to approve seven new laws, designed with total disregard for the dictates of the Church, to help the peasants live a better life. Ironically, Ruzante claims that by following these ‘pagan’ laws Padua peasants would be able to enjoy an earthly paradise, similar to the one described in the *Dialogo facetissimo*.

These new laws depict a utopian life for the peasants where longstanding Christian restrictions – especially those regarding eating – are softened if not abrogated altogether. Among the most interesting, one law allows peasants to skip fasting during religious festivals as their physical work requires them to be well-nourished. A second law states that it should not be a sin to work in the fields on religious holidays during harvest time.

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\(^{25}\) Fosson is a village near Loreo in the Polesine where Alvise Cornaro, patron of Ruzante, used to go hunting with his friends.

or to eat in the morning before Mass. These new laws not only aim at abrogating traditional required periods of fasting but they also convey a new appreciation of the life of sensual pleasures that were not normally seen by the Church as a significant part of the life of sixteenth-century poor peasants. Perhaps most importantly, they insisted that peasants be allowed to hunt – an activity widely forbidden – and eat not merely to satisfy their hunger, but to enjoy the pleasure of doing so. In fact, the sin of gluttony was to be abolished: everyone should be able to eat things because they tasted good, even when not hungry. Actually Ruzante goes to great lengths to explain the benefits of eating for pleasure, referring to the authority of the ‘doctors’ (perhaps Platina) who say that pleasure and what tastes good are also good for health. This, he holds, makes one live longer, do good deeds and go to paradise. It is worth noting here that Ruzante was not asking the cardinal to provide much-needed food for the hungry peasants in a time of famine; instead, he was calling for the liberation of food and eating from sin and guilt. As will be clearer later, Ruzante here was also taking a position in the ongoing debate on diet and health, which involved his patron and friend Alvise Cornaro along with other humanists such as Sperone Speroni.

Clearly Ruzante’s vision does not match up well with the medical literature or the prescriptive literature of the day briefly discussed earlier; yet for Ruzante’s peasants his new laws design an earthly paradise of the senses certainly much more attractive than the one reserved to the pious who observed the laws of the Church and were destined to suffer a sort of contrappasso in a sad paradise without food, drink or joy. This ‘human theology’ and these images of a ‘nontheistic paradise’ can be explained – according to Linda Carroll – in the context of the difficult economic times of the early sixteenth-century, along with the circulation in Northern Italy of works such as Thomas More’s Utopia and Desiderius Erasmus’s Encomium Moriae known by Ruzante, and the early diffusion of the ideas of evangelical reformers. These ideas had arrived in the Veneto in the

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27 ‘Number five: that eating not be a sin of gluttony when you eat because it tastes good and even though you are not hungry. Because the doctors say that what tastes good is good for you and makes for good health, and staying healthy you live a long time, [living a long time] you become old, you do good deeds, doing good deeds, you go to paradise [. . .]’. Beolco, La prima oratione, ed. Carroll 96–98.

first years of the sixteenth century via the trade routes that connected the Veneto with countries north of the Alps, such as Germany and Switzerland. It is not by accident that later in the century in the reprint of his works, the heterodox image of the two paradises and the radical laws proposed to Cardinal Cornaro in the Prima oratione incurred the wrath of Counter-Reformation censors. As far as the influence of Thomas More’s Utopia is concerned, Carroll shows that while More argued there that what is reasonable can give pleasure (‘and that therefore one can change people’s behaviour through laws appealing to reason’), Ruzante reversed this position claiming that attention to the body and sensual pleasures comes first, allowing one to live a healthy and long life, do good deeds and therefore earn paradise. This is actually what happens to the soul of Zaccarotto and Ruzante’s other dead friends in the Dialogo facetissimo.

To better understand Ruzante’s vision of the senses and sensual pleasure I would like to look at the ongoing debate on food and health, pleasure and taste in the intellectual circles he frequented. Alvise Cornaro, protector of Ruzante, rich landowner in the Padua countryside, and agricultural innovator, is most famous for his four volumes entitled Trattati della vita sobria (first edition, Padua 1558) that promised long life and health if readers ate with great moderation, and only certain foods. Cornaro claimed to rely primarily on his own experience: when he was young he lived following the common belief that what was pleasing to his taste was also good for his health. He even listed his once favourite foods such as melons, raw greens, pies, cold wine, fish and pork – all foods that in sixteenth-century treatises were labelled dangerous, along with our eels and fish pies. But Cornaro reassured his readers claiming to have reached the ripe old age of almost a hundred years and stressing that he had regained health once he eliminated from his diet all the foods that greatly appealed to his taste. Concessions to the pleasures of taste, gluttony – he concluded – led to sickness and a premature death, which he had successfully avoided. His Trattato was highly popular: published for the first time at mid-century it became the ‘only continuously published treatise in the genre’ with repeated editions and translations continuing from the seventeenth century.

to the twentieth centuries. In fact, Cornaro nourished his reputation as an expert on healthy eating to gain a long life in letters and other writings with well-conceived half-truths and imaginative fantasies about his own long life.

Ruzante, in contrast, died at forty (in 1542), not a short life by sixteenth-century standards, but a very young age in Cornaro’s opinion. In fact he regretted the death of his friend in a number of his letters and, as might be expected, attributed it to his food and drink excesses. In a letter written to the patriarch of Aquileia, Daniele Barbaro, after Ruzante’s death (and published in 1563), Cornaro declared that at ninety-one he had reached an earthly paradise thanks to his ‘vita sobria’, which was pleasing to God because it was ‘hostile to the senses and guided by reason’. The language and references used by Cornaro in this and other works show that he wished to advertise his theory and gain supporters by showing that his friend Ruzante was wrong about the senses both in his life and in his works. Even though he does not mention Ruzante, his letter appears to refer to him twice: first in the reference to the earthly paradise that one can enjoy even after the age of eighty thanks to the cult of Saint Moderation (Santa Continenza); second in the affirmation that when a man

32 Albala, Eating Right 36.
33 The date of his birth is uncertain. Alvise Cornaro was probably born in 1484 and died in 1566. In his first two wills he declared, respectively, to have been born in 1478 and in 1482. On this, see Blason M., “La vita di Alvise Cornaro (1484–1566)”, in Puppi L. (ed.), Alvise Cornaro e il suo tempo (Padua: 1980) 18–26. If the date of 1484 is correct, he certainly lived a long life, eighty years, but not more than ninety, as he claimed in some of his writings. See Sambin P., Per le biografie di Angelo Beolco, il Ruzante, e di Alvise Cornaro (Padua: 2002) 121–122. His work survives today, translated and adapted by followers of the ‘caloric restriction theory’, as a popular health fad.
34 In this text Cornaro declares that he is ninety-one years old, an example of the manipulation of his age. See also the affirmation in his “Amorevoli essortazione del Magnifico M. Alvise Cornaro”: ‘Per il che io dico che, essendo (per la Iddio gratia) giunto a la età di 95 anni . . .’ (‘For this reason I affirm that, thanks to God, I have reached the age of ninety-five [. . .]’), in Cornaro, Scritti sulla vita sobria, ed. Milani 122–127, at 122.
35 ‘Et io, che so da quale cagione procede, sono astretto a dimostrarla et fare conoscere che si può possedere uno paradiso terrestre dopo la età della ottanta anni, il quale possedio io; ma non si può possederlo se non con il mezo della santa Continenza et della virtuosa Vita Sobria, amate molto dal grande Idio, perché son nemiche dil senso et amiche della ragione’ (‘And because I know the reason for this, I am obliged to demonstrate and to make known to everybody that it is possible to enjoy an earthly paradise after the age of eighty as I do; but one cannot have it without the help of Saint Continence and the Virtuous Sober Life, greatly loved by God because they are enemies of the senses and friends of reason’). See Cornaro, “Lettera scritta dal Magnifico M. Alvise Cornaro al Reverendissimo Barbaro, Patriarca eletto di Aquileia”, in Cornaro, Scritti sulla vita sobria, ed. Milani 115–121, at 115.
arrives at the age of forty he has to change his way of life regarding eating
and drinking if he wants to grow old.36 In another exchange of letters with
his friend, the humanist Sperone Speroni, who was involved in the cur-
rent debate pro or against the vita sobria, Cornaro explicitly accuses the
disorderly and intemperate eating habits of Ruzante as being the cause of
his premature death:

I try to find a way to persuade my friends that the excesses of the body are
the reason many men die young. I tell them this and they do not believe
me; nonetheless they continue to die because of this and keep me in this
unhappiness in which I find myself now that our dearest Messer Ruzzante
has died.37

Alvise Cornaro’s meditations on the vita sobria, and the difference between
his longevity and his friend’s short life, led him to rewrite one of Ruzante’s
most famous works. A few years after the latter’s death, Cornaro composed
his own Oration (c. 1545–1550), which was a close imitation of the Prima
Orationem.38 In it, the laws in favour of the peasants are repeated with some
significant changes and one major omission: the law that allows peasants
to eat not merely to satisfy hunger, but to enjoy the pleasure of doing so,
is quietly dropped.39 Cornaro did not limit himself to this crucial deletion: he
also dedicated a long paragraph to the advertisement of his strict diet,
lifting concepts from his Vita sobria to reaffirm his condemnation of any
pleasure in eating and the unequivocal equation of eating with gluttony.40

36 ‘[.. .] ma l’uomo mentre che è giovine, perché è più sensuale, che ragionevole,
seguita il senso; & essendo poi pervenuto alla età di XXXX ò L anni debbe pur sapere che
all’ora è giunto alla metà della sua vita [.. .] la onde è necessario di mutare vita nel suo
mangiare, e bere, dalli quali dipende il vivere sano & lungamente’ (‘[.. .] but when a man is
young he follows the senses because he is more sensual than reasonable. But when he gets
to the age of forty or fifty he must know that he has reached his middle age [.. .] therefore
it becomes necessary to change his lifestyle in eating and drinking, on which our long and
healthy life depends’). Cornaro, Scritti sulla vita sobria, ed. Milani 118.
37 ‘[.. .] io gelo dico e essi non me lo credono e pur se non per desordenii se ne moreno
e tengono me in questa infelicità, ne la quale son ora, e più che mai fusse per la morte
del nostro carissimo messer Ruzzante’. See the letter in the “Appendice” to Bellinati C.,
“Alvise Cornaro governatore del Vescovado di Padova”, in Puppi L. (ed.), Alvise Cornaro e
il suo tempo 140–148 (letter at 146–148) and in Cornaro, Scritti sulla vita sobria, ed. Milani
141–143.
38 The Oration by Cornaro has been published and edited by Marisa Milani: Cornaro A.,
Orazione per il Cardinale Marco Cornaro e Pianto per la morte del Bembo, ed. M. Milani
39 The Oration is discussed in Chapter III of Lippi E., Cornariana: Studi su Alvise Cornaro
(Padua: 1983) 93–152. Lippi juxtaposes the section on the pleasure of eating from the Prima
oratione by Ruzante with the modified version written by Cornaro; see ibid., 140–142.
40 Lippi, Cornariana 141–145.
For Cornaro, only by following the precepts of his *vita sobria* and continence could one live a long life.

Ruzante’s last work, the *Lettera all’Alvarotto* (1536, *more Veneto*), provides his final word in this debate on food habits and the *vita sobria*. The *Lettera all’Alvarotto*, which critics have defined as the spiritual testament of Ruzante, is a complex apology for the senses and the materiality of life. Ruzante reaffirms his earlier conviction that an honest life respectful of the bodily senses will lead humans to heaven. Reason and religion, the guiding principles in Cornaro’s *Vita sobria*, are here completely shunned. Ruzante addresses his *Lettera* to his friend Marco Alvarotto, who had been his companion in his theatrical ventures in the Veneto. He explains to him his sudden desire to live forever on this earth and his subsequent search in his books to find Lady Temperance – according to the teaching of his patron Alvise Cornaro – and ask her to help him realize his desire. This brings no results, however, and Ruzante finally falls asleep. In a dream he enters an orchard and meets his dead friend, the actor Barba Polo, who guides him through a beautiful landscape. Lady Temperance is nowhere to be found there. Barba Polo indicates instead Lady Mirth, who rules the blissful place along with her brother Lord Smile, Lady Joy, Madam Feast, Lord Party, and many other smiling and happy inhabitants. Nearby, Lord Appetite and Lord Taste are setting the table for a dinner worthy of an abbot. Maybe, I would add, they are even preparing a dish of dangerous but tasty eels. Here in this earthly paradise are finally found, living happily and enjoying their senses, the good companions of Ruzante to whom the *Dialogo facetissimo* had promised just such a paradise.

The image of the orchard paradise used by Ruzante was taken up in the same period by the poet Francesco Berni and his friends in the Vignaiuoli academy, a group that produced a rich array of ‘food poems’. The orchard they represented in satirical poems and their commentaries was not, however, an earthly paradise of ‘honest pleasures’ for good companions; rather, it tended playfully to overturn the Petrarchan canon with food images alluding to sexual parts of the body and through mocking imitation of the language of medical advice literature. At other points, however, they actually talked about various types of food and the pleasures inherent in the act of eating. If humanist writers such as Platina played a

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42 Barba Polo, also mentioned in the comedy *Piovana*, was a famous actor in the circle of Ruzante.
major role in developing a new philosophy of eating in the Renaissance, poets and writers were similarly influential in what historian Jean-Louis Flandrin has called the passage from dietetics to gastronomy. The Italian word *gusto*, not quite appropriately translated by the English words ‘taste’ and ‘palate’, started to be used more frequently in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century literature to indicate the pleasure of eating. Progressively, it came to indicate *il buongusto*, or the ability to evaluate not just food but other aspects of everyday life from an aesthetic point of view that involved all the senses. Pietro Aretino, Francesco Berni and other poets and writers from the group of the Vignaiuoli, who were all active in the first fifty years of the Cinquecento, all championed the word *gusto* and its aesthetic connotations. If the good companions of Ruzante had to search for their earthly paradise in dreams, Aretino and his friends living in Venice in those same years certainly attempted to find their paradise of the senses, especially taste, in everyday life. In a letter written in 1537 to Gianfrancesco Pocopanno, Aretino thanks his friend for sending him a *sonetto* accompanied by a basket of the most prized fruit of the time – pears. The language of food dominates the brief letter: the gift is well received as it offers both the fruit of his friend’s clever wit and of his orchard. Aretino tells him that both have been agreeable to his mind and his *gusto*, but – he points out – if the *sonetto* is sweet, the pears have gone beyond the excellence of every taste, in this case defined by the

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44 Montanari M., *Il formaggio con le pere: La storia in un proverbio* (Rome – Bari: 2008) 93–103. For France see Flandrin, “From Dietetics to Gastronomy”, in *Food: A Culinary History* 428–432. It is interesting to note that Cornaro in his *Trattato* often uses the word *gusto*, but only in a negative sense; see, for instance, his explanation of how one has to eat only what is necessary to survive: ‘sapendo che quel più è tutto infirmità et morte, et che è diletto solo del *gusto*, il qual passa in un momento, ma lungamente poi dà dispiacer et nocimento al corpo, et alla fine l’ammazza insieme con l’anima’ (‘Because we know that excess is all illness and death; and that it pleases only the palate, which pleasure lasts for a moment, while in the long run it brings sadness and harm to the body, and in the end kills the body along with the soul’; my emphasis); Cornaro, “Trattato della vita sobria”, in idem, *Scrivi sulla vita sobria*, ed. Milani 79–101, at 80. Interestingly, the Italian word *gusto* entered the English dictionary with the meaning of ‘taste’ as well as ‘pleasure’.

45 On the attention Aretino devoted to his senses and in particular taste in his letters see Giannetti L., “Italian Renaissance Food-Fashioning or the Triumph of Greens”, *California Italian Studies Journal* 1 (2010) 1–16, at 11 (online at: http://escholarship.org/uc/item/1mgz500d).

word *sapore*. Ironically, while Aretino greatly enjoyed the most fragile and prized fruit of the time, a few years later Cornaro, who received the same gift from a friend, does not share the same reaction and writes back to the giver:

[... ] those pears were really beautiful and good, as my son-in-law, who enjoyed them, reassured me; as you know, I do not eat them because my Lady Continence already long ago prohibited them to me.48

The Lady Temperance that Ruzante could not find anywhere in the orchard-paradise of his dreams certainly was to accompany Cornaro in his long, abstemious, and perhaps not very happy life.

This article has focused on a lively and often intense debate in sixteenth-century Venetian culture about the sense of taste, temperance, sobriety and the pleasure of eating. It reflects, obviously, just one aspect of the many emerging discussions about food and taste more generally in that period. In fact, behind and beyond Alvise Cornaro’s sobriety, Ruzante’s call for the elimination of any guilt from eating and Pietro Aretino’s refined taste for food, there existed a whole range of literary reflections on taste, from the descriptions of the exaggerated appetite of the giant Morgante in the mock-epic poem by Luigi Pulci to the characters of gluttonous parasites and courtiers appearing in numerous other works of the period.49 Such attention to taste in the literary imagination of sixteenth-century Italy, even though not always positive, homogeneous or unified, is nonetheless a sign of the beginning of a long cultural revolution in which taste, pleasure and celebration progressively displaced gluttony and sin.

47 ‘I frutti del vostro ingegno e del vostro orto mi sono stati si soave cibo all’intelletto e al *gusto*, che altro tale non ho provato sin qui. Certamente il sonetto è dolce, ma le pere [...] trapassano il segno d’ogni *sapore* e d’ogni *sugo*’ (*The fruit of your wit and your orchard have been such a pleasant food to my mind and my taste that I have never felt anything similar. Surely the sonnet is sweet but the pears have gone beyond the excellence of every taste and sauce*; my emphasis). Ibid.


49 The mocking presentation of the gluttonous appetites of monks and parasites in comic prose and poetry is testimony to a culture that continued to be troubled by the idea of pleasure in eating and to condemn the sense of taste, even though less virulently than from a church’s pulpit. On the other hand, early Florentine humanists like Matteo Palmieri and Leon Battista Alberti, while still condemning excesses at the table, had already recognized that taste plays a crucial role in establishing one’s identity as citizen and Christian. For an extensive discussion of the Florentine humanists and their take on food and taste see Vitullo, “Taste and Temptation”.

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——, *Dialogo facetissimo et ridiculosissimo di Ruzzante Recitato à Fosson alla caccia, l'anno della carestia 1528* (Venice, Stephano di Alessi: 1554).


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