Eating Well in the Italian Kitchen

Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well
Pellegrino Artusi
Translated by Murtha Baca and Stephen Sartarelli
Introduction by Luigi Ballerini
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003

Anyone with more than a passing interest in Italian food knows the name Pellegrino Artusi (1820–1911). His great opus, La scienza in cucina e l’arte di mangiar bene (Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well), towers above all other Italian cookbooks because its author sought to teach his compatriots not only about the glories of their cuisine but also about what it means to be Italian.

L’Artusi, as Italians call this book, is for them the equivalent of Julia Child, James Beard, Fanny Farmer, Betty Crocker, Irma Rombauer, and Delia Smith all rolled into one. Its tone, very much in the author’s voice, is kindly and didactic. The only book in Italian that can even pretend to approach L’Artusi’s iconic status is Ada Boni’s Il Talsimano della Felicità.

Part of the book’s success is that it was written at a time when there were few volumes that gathered the wisdom of Italian restaurateurs and home cooks. The book (published in 1891) came on the heels of Italy’s becoming a unified nation in 1871, a period when citizens of the new Republic of Italy were attempting to comprehend their new country. Artusi lived through the Risorgimento—the movement for national unification—and was an ardent proponent of it. An earlier book of his was a biography of Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827), a leading poet and patriot.

Artusi’s book stands with Manzoni’s great novel, I Promessi Sposi (The Betrothed), and the music of Verdi as works that not only are great unto themselves but represented a sense of identity and self-worth to a nascent country with no nationalistic feeling. Verdi’s operas (especially Nabucco, I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata, and La Battaglia di Legnano) were calls to throw off occupiers and find a common cause of nationhood. Aida, produced the year the Italian republic was born, is an exploration of how to square personal priorities with those of a nation. The Manzoni book was written in a literary Italian that became a standard for modern vernacular as much as Dante, seven hundred years earlier, encapsulated the language of his time in his writings. Artusi chose to give Italians their definition by telling them how they ate.

Originally, Artusi referred to his book as Science in the Kitchen, promoting the aspects of well-being to be derived from food. The first edition had 475 recipes. Artusi continued his research, and the title took on the added name of The Art of Eating Well. The fourteenth edition, published in 1910 just before the author’s death, contained 790 recipes. By that time he had sold 52,000 copies, a vast number in a nation still plagued by high illiteracy.

Before unification the Italian peninsula was a collection of ancient city-states, fiefdoms, duchies, and vast holdings of the Catholic Church. One could journey twenty kilometers and be in an entirely different place in terms of politics, religion, philosophy, and cuisine. Sections of the Italian peninsula had known centuries of foreign domination by Arabs, Austrians, Frenchmen, Greeks, Spaniards, and others. These peoples brought languages, ingredients, and cooking traditions. Italy, and all of Europe, was also the beneficiary of the so-called Columbian Exchange, in which food products arrived from the newly conquered Americas: corn, tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, turkey, chocolate, and certain beans are only the most famous examples.

The story of Italian cuisine, then, is one of assimilation of native and foreign ingredients and applying them to common cooking practices. For reasons of economics as well as taste, most Italian chefs and home cooks reached for products near at hand and still do today. Most foods were “seasonal” and “local” in Italy centuries before these became buzz words for tenderness and well-being among
today’s chattering foodie masses. This is because a fundamental tenet of Italian eating is that food must be as fresh as possible and is tastiest when close to its natural state. Sauces were meant for pasta, while other flavorings (mostarda, herb salsas, lemon, grated cheese, spices) were served alongside finished dishes as accents.

Before Artusi, books in Italy about cooking often had a medical focus. Food, herbs, and spices were indicated to promote health. Other books were casual collections of home recipes or, often, recipes used in convents, monasteries, and noble families. Writing was often done in local languages or dialects that were comprehensible primarily to those who wrote them. Artusi addressed all of these issues. He gathered recipes from many sources, made comments on their origin or their health benefits, and notably, wrote them in a clear, colloquial Italian that had the tone of a favorite uncle rather than that of a formidable scholar.

One recipe, *Un uovo per un bambino* (An Egg for a Child), is typical:

Would you like to know how to quiet a child who is crying for a morning treat? All you need is a fresh egg. Beat the yolk with two or three teaspoons of powdered sugar in a shallow bowl. Beat the egg white until stiff and carefully fold it into the yolk. Place the bowl before the child with slices of bread which he can dip in the egg, and with which he can make himself a yellow mustache—he’ll be in heaven.

Would that all children’s meals were as harmless as this, for there would be far fewer hysterical and convulsive children in this world! I am talking about foods that irritate people’s nerves, such as coffee, tea, wine and other household products, tobacco among them, which become part of household routines much more quickly than they should.

Most of the recipes, of course, are more elaborate than beating an egg. Yet even food for grownups would have a beguiling introduction:

Dear Mr. Meat Loaf, please come forward, do not be shy. I want to introduce you to my readers. I know that you are modest and humble because, given your background, you feel inferior to many others. But take heart and do not doubt that with a few words in your favor you shall find someone who wants to taste you and who might even reward you with a smile.

The first recipe in the book is for broth, an important underpinning for many Italian dishes, especially in Emilia-Romagna. Artusi digresses to tell his reader that onions are optional because they “make wind.” The second recipe is *Brodo per gli Ammalati* (Broth for the Sick), made only with water, salt, and veal or beef and simmered for six hours. This preparation is still a nostrum throughout Italy: I can report that it was my daily fare during a three-week confinement in Milan, along with cooked rice, a piece of plain cheese, an apple, and a roll. On this regime a patient wills himself to health, knowing that pasta, pizza, gelati, wine, coffee, and other delights await him just beyond hospital walls!

Artusi had a considerable impact on how Italian food would be perceived and prepared in many key ways, but two stand out in particular: how a recipe is written and what makes food Italian. Many Artusi recipes are short essays in which the ingredients are included in the body of the text. It is necessary to read the whole essay and then organize the ingredients. In these recipes ingredients arrive in the order they are needed. In recipes in which the components appear in a list above the text, they are often listed by mass rather than order of usage. This has become the standard in Italian recipe writing and is confusing to readers elsewhere who are interested in process and sequence.

For example, in his recipe for spaghetti with hake, Artusi lists ingredients by weight: “500 grams of spaghetti; 500 grams of hake; 60 grams of butter, 4 tablespoons of olive oil, 4 tablespoons of Marsala wine; a dash of nutmeg.” It is therefore a surprise to read his first instruction: “Chop a medium-size onion.” Later on he calls for tomato paste, which was also not listed in the ingredients. And while the spaghetti was the first item on the list, it is the last to be used. It is interesting that Artusi calls for grated cheese with this pasta with fish sauce, something that is considered a sacrilege by many who claim to know Italian food. He concludes by telling us that “this recipe serves five people, and will please all of them.”

The Artusian recipe style, which was famously emulated in English by Elizabeth David in her writings on Italian food, is frustrating for a cook who favors precision. Yet Artusi understood that his reader was looking for guidance and encouragement to bring forth her own *estro* (the lovely Italian word that suggests a combination of inspiration and whimsical creativity).

While there are preparations from many parts of Italy, this book clearly favors Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, the places where Artusi spent most of his time. The uninformed reader from abroad would incorrectly deduce that most great Italian dishes are from these two central regions. As has become clear in recent years, there is exquisite food to be had in every corner of the nation.

The author was from Forlimpopoli, in Romagna, an area of Italy known for its amatory ways and for people who delight in food, wine, and sex with extreme devotion. The
author's first name, Pellegrino (Pilgrim), was ideally suited to this unmarried man who traveled the peninsula making the acquaintance of ladies of all classes who revealed to him their secrets of love and cookery.

Artusi spent a lot of time in Florence, a center of nationalist ferment as well as a crucible of national identity. The city’s Church of Santa Croce is something of an Italian Pantheon, including the tombs of Michelangelo, Galileo, Rossini, and other geniuses. It became a shrine for those who sought to draw from the well of Italianità. As a result, Tuscan food appears in his book to a such an outsized degree that one would think that it is the heart and soul of Italian cookery rather than being a region whose fare struggles to rival those of many other regions, including Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Campania, Apulia, Sicily, and Sardinia.

Despite these shortcomings, anyone who seeks to know Italian food avoids Artusi at his or her peril. He is the fountainhead of modern Italian cookery and is read by people throughout that nation, who treat it as if they were dipping into the diary of an old friend. This faithful and amiable translation by Murtha Baca and Stephen Sartarelli comes as close to capturing the flavor of the original as one might hope. The introduction by Luigi Ballerini provides the reader with a learned explanation of the taste and attitudes of Italy in the time when Artusi was gathering his recipes. And a reader nowadays, with careful consideration of these recipes, can summon his or her own estro and create tasty evocations of the food that unified a nation.