

## CHAPTER TEN

### SOCIAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS FOOD AND EATING

The culinary progress of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has already been highlighted in previous chapters. Technical improvements and innovations, such as the clarification of stock for jelly by means of egg whites, the development of a type of shortcrust pastry incorporating oil or butter, and the proliferation of sweet dishes, like fritters, 'torte' and 'tartes', all indicate that the skill and art of the cook was appreciated and appropriately rewarded in mediaeval Europe.

At the same time, an evolution in taste was evidenced by the greater emphasis on artistry, less on mere ostentation. In fashion, too, a parallel trend can be perceived; a decline in the use of gold-embroidered fabrics and in the ornamentation of clothes with jewels and precious stones, in favour of the more subtle effects of craftsmanship.<sup>1</sup>

The social changes which sparked the revival of cuisine and the reappearance of cookery books have been described earlier. One corollary of these was a shift in the attitudes towards food and eating, which

simultaneously inspired, and were inspired by, developments in the culinary sphere. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw a further evolution of ideas, relating to both the symbolic values of foods and attitudes towards foods and eating, and the advance of sensualism can be interpreted as symptomatic of the social changes.

It has become conventional to depict the mediaeval era in terms of dualities - town and country, fast and feast, scarcity and plenty - and although the images are rather simplistic they nevertheless relate to the reality of mediaeval life. Transcending these basic antitheses was the opposition between asceticism, represented by the rigid authority of the Church, and sensualism, or individual freedom. Between these two extremes is inevitably a tension, which for mediaeval society found expression in popular themes such as the battle between 'Caresme' and 'Charnage', in which the boisterous, plump and jovial Charnage inevitably defeats and drives away the lean, sad spectre of Caresme.<sup>2</sup>

The same theme appeared in the works of a Genoese poet of the late thirteenth-early fourteenth century as a debate, either between Gula and Ratio, or between Carnis Privium and Dies Veneris, the arguments in which reduced to a choice between here-and-now pleasures and damnation thereafter, or self-restraint and heavenly salvation.<sup>3</sup> Another manifestation of this tension appeared in the ballads describing the mythical land of Cockaigne, which circulated, particularly in northern France, England and

Germany, around the thirteenth century, precisely the time when heretic movements, such as Catharism, were spreading throughout southern France, Italy and Catalonia.<sup>4</sup>

The legend of Cockaigne gives perhaps the clearest illustration of the dichotomy of daily life, the distance between dream and reality for the ordinary folk. In this idealised paradise the houses are built of sausages, hams and sturgeons; roast geese, tailed by the necessary accompaniment of 'blanche aillie' run through the streets. All the days are feast days ("Toz jors festes et diemanches"); in every year there are four periods of Christmas and Easter and four vintages, and Lent comes only once every twenty years. One can eat and drink whatever and whenever one wishes, "Sanz contredit et sanz deffense". There is no need to work - "Qui plus i dort, plus i gaaigne" - and coins everywhere for the finding. The merchants are 'cortois' and offer their fine clothes of fur and Alexandrian silk, in striking shades of scarlet, violet or green, for everyone to make a choice. The women are all beautiful and tolerant; they welcome lovers and, rather than being censured, "Ainz en sont moult plus honoree". The ultimate blessing is the fountain of youth, which ensures that no one ever gets older than thirty. This was the dream.

#### GLUTTONY

The land of Cockaigne embodied all the desires which were beyond the reach of the ordinary individual, and while

some of them obviously translate as envy of the wealthy classes (fine clothes, fine foods) others express an opposition to the strictures of the church, a resentment of its rules which ordained what and how one ate, and of the punishment which ensued upon their transgression. For while the mediaeval church esteemed temperance ('Sobresse') as a virtue, its antithesis was the sin of Gluttony, sixth of the seven deadly sins.<sup>5</sup>

This concept of gluttony as a sin appears to have developed in the very early years of the Church, a corollary to the saintliness of ascetic fasting and abstinence from certain foods. There is little reference to excessive eating in either the Old or New Testament, although Saint Paul explicitly brands as "enemies of the cross of Christ" those "whose God is their belly".<sup>6</sup> In his dissection of Gluttony into its various branches and divisions, the author of Le Menagier made it clear that the sin was not merely in eating and/or drinking to excess, but in the consequences of these acts - loose and blasphemous talk, absence from church or work because of a hangover - and in Lust, the sin born of Gluttony.

More specifically, Gluttony resided in manners of eating and/or drinking which contravened Church principles.<sup>7</sup> This interpretation seems to have been universal, since it is repeated, in approximately the same terms, by Brunetto Latini and Francesc Eixeminis.<sup>8</sup> The latter, a near-contemporary of Le Menagier's author, condemned the drunkenness which usually accompanies eating to excess, the desire for foods that are too refined and,

in particular, are not appropriate to one's social status, and the wish to distinguish oneself, in the presence of guests, by the lavishness of one's table. About a century earlier the anonymous Genoese poet described Gluttony as one of the vanities of this world, which diverts man from the path to heaven and leads him to damnation; he added that over-eating (and drinking) was not only wrong per se, but it predisposed one to Lust and provoked illnesses (as many medical men since have continued to stress).<sup>9</sup> In sum, mediaeval society viewed Gluttony as a contravention of both written and unwritten rules, and a more serious transgression than it is interpreted today, as "the excessive use of things in themselves legitimate".<sup>10</sup>

The measure of respect for religious ideals probably varied with social station and economic circumstances, the poor being more resentful of Church impositions. Significantly, Gluttony and Lust are omitted from the allegorical figures which adorn the wall of the Garden of the Rose, and which represent most of the better-known sins plus three other images more properly considered as misfortunes (Tristesse, Vieillesse, Pauvrete).<sup>11</sup> The reason was surely not that these two were more difficult to represent but more likely, that in a courtly society less disgrace was attached to such 'sins'; Poverty and Jealousy might exclude one from the garden, but not Gluttony.

#### CHANGE IN ATTITUDES

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries can be

glimpsed an undercurrent of change. Religious ideals became further distanced from actuality, and sensualism more prevalent. The function of food and eating shifted away from the simple satisfaction of needs to become an expression of cultural individuality. A general increase in tension became evident, as different sets of values were adopted by mediaeval society, and a spirit of rebellion began to appear:

"In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, under the aegis of the Church, intellectual studies had all centred on theology, and artistic techniques on architecture; the Church was the inspiration of intellectual and artistic endeavour. All this was rejected by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; analysis appealed to them more than synthesis, and they cherished liberty more than discipline; they were more critical and more individualist." <sup>12</sup>

Mediaeval society was seeking a new order, a new equilibrium between an aristocracy clinging to its traditional and established values as its military and economic role was whittled away, and a bourgeoisie increasingly conscious of its importance. In this society taking stock of itself, concrete details of life-as-it-is-lived appeared with increasing frequency in both art and literature.

Thus, while "the nobility was crushed between the monarchy and the bourgeoisie,... ruined financially by the rise of an urban, monetary economy", the Church "was being

seduced by earthly pleasures and the trappings of a life of ease,... too weak to take itself in hand."<sup>13</sup> The erosion of its monopolistic authority is evident in the emphasis on civil as well as canon law and in the increasing power of municipal authorities. It is seen, too, in the Church's compromise approval of commerce and the relaxation of Church strictures relating to food and eating. The strictness of Lent began to be challenged; Charles V and his wife received special permission from the Pope to eat the normally-proscribed eggs and dairy foods during Lent, and this dispensation extended to cooks and official tasters.<sup>14</sup> In 1491, the duchess of Brittany and the whole of her household were granted the privilege of eating butter in Lent in 1491, a privilege shared, shortly after, by all the inhabitants of Brittany.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the dukes of Milan frequently purchased indulgences from Rome.<sup>16</sup> The Church bent easily under pressure, although not without exacting its own retribution, often in monetary terms.

Practically the whole of western Europe shared in these developments, but the demands for modification of the Lenten restrictions were louder in northern France; just as Charnage conquered Caresme, so the pleasures of the palate overcame spiritual submission. The impositions of the Church may have been more easily accommodated by Mediterranean society, where a degree of individuality had always been accepted, than in the north of France where the imprint of a strong feudal system persisted. (In addition, as explained earlier, Mediterranean peoples were

more accustomed to the olive oil which obligatorily replaced pork fat and butter in Lent.) In the literature of the Mediterranean region, too, the political, intellectual and material actualities had been addressed earlier in the poetry of the troubadours. (This might account for the apparent localisation of the Cockaigne myth in northern Europe.)

To explain "the reaction of a healthy sensuality against an overstrained idealism", from the early mediaeval period to the Renaissance and beyond, Werner Sombart has proposed a theory of the "secularisation of love".<sup>17</sup> The "hedonistic aesthetic conception of a woman and the love of her, as it gradually emerged after the fifteenth century, stood in irreconcilable opposition to the religious or institutional restraints to which love had been subjected in former times."<sup>18</sup> Significantly, Sombart saw 'secularised love' as a Mediterranean rather than a northern characteristic. "It is much more in keeping with the spirit of the countries of Southern Europe to have perpetuated a mode of life which had been ushered in by the troubadours. In any event, a spirit like that which pervades the Decameron appears to us as the direct continuation of the rapturous lyrics of the preceding centuries."<sup>19</sup>

A similar theory can be applied to food and eating, where a parallel trend can be observed in the gradual diminution of Church power and control in the face of a different manifestation of a 'healthy sensuality'. As the rules on what could be eaten, and when, were whittled



away, so the 'sin' of Gluttony faded - or at least, the threat of eternal damnation, vividly portrayed by Dante (the gluttons were consigned to the third circle of Hell). Similarly, as with 'secularised love', there was probably less distance between the 'hedonistic aesthetic conception' and the 'religious or institutional restraints' in Mediterranean regions where the feudal system had not imposed itself to the same extent as in the north, and where the civilisation of the troubadours had "proclaimed the independence of the ethic in relation to the institutionalised Christian hierarchy and the dogma it purveyed".<sup>20</sup> For the anonymous Genoese poet, it was as reprehensible to wander through a fragrant orchard without tasting the fruits as to devour all at once.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout western Europe, a greater individual liberty in matters of eating and drinking might well have given impetus to the culinary refinement and extravagance of the latter half of the fifteenth century. The Church still condemned it as wasteful excess, and the occasional reaction of civil authorities was to impose sumptuary laws, the purpose of which was ostensibly to curb extravagant spending on foods and clothes. However, as Mennell remarks, the problem was "one of social display, not of sheer physical appetite... Enormous banquets were perhaps acceptable when given by feudal lords sharing their viands by custom and obligation with their followers and distributing remains to the poor, but were seen as excess and mere social display when copied by rising strata whose social obligations were ill-defined and

dependents few."<sup>22</sup>

Such laws, however, seem to have been singularly ineffective; either they were openly flouted (a search of wardrobes in fourteenth-century Florence revealed that most ladies had gowns made of the forbidden fabrics) or loopholes were found (as Francesco Datini did, for his daughter's wedding feast).<sup>23</sup> Extravagances continued, culminating in the institution of the banquet.

#### THE BANQUET: EPITOME OF SENSUALISM

A taste for luxury seems to have been particularly characteristic of Italy, and possibly extended to the Mediterranean in general if, as Baudrillard has suggested, it was a result of better town administration, greater liberty and an economic system more favourable to the accumulation of wealth.<sup>24</sup> The anonymous Genoese poet described his fellow citizens as so well dressed that they could be taken for marquis, and their wives for queens; they were so devoted to the art of dining that their dinners and feasts surpassed anything ever seen.<sup>25</sup>

Milan at the end of the fifteenth century was "the most opulent city of Italy. Wherever one goes one can expect a well-laid table ... the lowest citizen of Milan practises a real 'art de vivre' ".<sup>26</sup> The accounts of high living in this city - whole roasts gilded with gold leaf, a wedding feast lasting three days, elaborate and large-scale table decorations of sugar or almond paste, sculpted into flattering likenesses of worthy citizens or

allegorical allusions - endorse this reputation.

It was in Italy that the 'banquet' - yet another refinement of the late fifteenth century - had its beginning. Both the French 'banquet' and the Spanish 'banquete' derived from the Italian 'banchetto', diminutive of 'banco', a long bench (seat) or long table. The prototypic Italian 'banchetto' seems to have evolved as a different kind of meal, presented in a different way: "Insieme disinano et cenano con banchetti molto abondevole de varii cibi e bonissimi vini", wrote Bandello at the start of the sixteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

In other countries, the banquet took different forms. In England it appeared in the sixteenth century, as "a third and final course to the formal dinner, a development of the earlier dessert of spiced cakes and apples, hippocras and wafers. The participants withdrew to another room, or in summer to an outside arbour or summerhouse (the gentry built banqueting houses in their parks for the purpose) and regaled themselves on sweet wines, fruit tarts, marmalades, preserves, suckets, marchpanes and jelly."<sup>28</sup>

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century France, the banquet may have been an additional meal, totally separate from the standard two of 'dîner' and 'souper', but with special features which distinguished it from these. This aspect of superfluity effectively made the banquet a luxury, exclusive to those who had the leisure to enjoy it and the wealth to afford it, and thereby a new means of demonstrating social discrimination. These features of the

banquet were emphasised in the mediaeval morality play, La Condamnation du Banquet, where the happy group of revellers who pass blithely from Dîner to Souper to Banquet in the course of one day bear such names as Bonne-Compagnie, Gourmandise, Friandise, Passe-Temps, Je boy à vous, Je plaige d'autant.<sup>29</sup> Dîner takes place in the middle of the day, Souper at the end of the day and Banquet in the evening. The moral of the entertainment is explicit; Souper and Banquet are accused of corrupting the guests and provoking such maladies as gout, apoplexy and pleurisy; they are tried before Dame Expérience and found guilty, whereupon Banquet is executed and Souper is ordered to keep a respectable distance from Dîner.

The inspiration may have been Italian, but the supplementary aspect seems to have been particularly French. According to Montaigne, the French customarily offered music and dancing after 'souper', while in Italy these entertainments preceded the 'souper' which, therefore, and particularly in summer, might have been eaten quite late. The after-ball 'souper' given by Montaigne at Lucca, in late May 1581, did not start until after ten o'clock in the evening.<sup>30</sup> Montaigne comments on this difference in customs between France and Italy and adds: :J'invitai tout le monde à souper, parce qu'en Italie les festins ne sont autre chose qu'un de nos repas bien légers de France."<sup>31</sup> However, the banquet was not invariably an additional meal, and the best known of all mediaeval spectacles, the 'Banquet du Faisan' given by the duke of Burgundy at Lille on February 17, 1453, was,

in effect, an extraordinarily sumptuous 'souper'. It is clear, from Olivier de la Marche's account, that this banquet took place in the early evening, after the afternoon tournament, and he even refers to it as 'le souper'.<sup>32</sup>

In La Condamnation du Banquet, Banquet is further differentiated from the other meals by the style of service. For Diner and Souper the guests sit at table and servants bring in successive courses, but for Banquet all the foods are prepared in advance and displayed on a 'buffet', from which guests serve themselves. It is difficult to know how, or even whether, banquet foods might have differed from the dishes presented at any extravagant dinner. The most remarkable feature of the four banquet menus reproduced in the printed edition of Le Viandier is the lavish - and, to today's tastes, incongruous - use of sugar, which may have functioned as a crude but clear expression of the distinction between banquet and dinner. Banquet dishes were intended to be seen as much as eaten, and therefore emphasised symbolic over nutritional values. They were invariably the most costly ones, but expense was not an end in itself; the dishes were also intended to display the art and craft of the cook, for the admiration of connoisseurs.

What is clear is that the banquet - whether through its redundancy or its extravagance - became another means by which an elite could set itself apart from a rising bourgeoisie. Olivier de la Marche hinted as much in describing the adoption of the banquet custom by the

aristocracy of northern France in the mid-fifteenth century: "et se faisoient grandes cheres, et grans festimens: et se mirent sus aucuns convives, que l'on appelle banquets: qui commencèrent à petis fraiz, et monterent et multiplièrent en grandes assemblees, et fraiz de viandes, et d'autres mets: et montoient et croissoient iceux banquets de chevaliers à seigneurs: et de grand à grand multiplioient en despense: et vouloit chacun monstrer plus-grande chose, que son par-avant."<sup>33</sup>

In the sixteenth century - in Italy, though not in France - the banquet theme was explicit in the titles of books such as Cristoforo di Messisbugo's Banchetti, Composizione di vivande et apparecchio generale and Giovanni Roselli's Epulario.<sup>34</sup> The banquet developed into a particular style of meal, the special and celebratory meal, staged with pomp and ceremony, on the occasion of a wedding, or the arrival or departure of a prince. Messisbugo prescribes in unparalleled detail the staging of lavish, formal, ceremonial meals, from the setting of the tables with their ornamental sugar figures, of specified size and design (for example, five figures each of Venus, Cupid and Bacchus, painted and partially gilded), to the music and dances performed during the course of the spectacle. These replaced the complicated theatrical 'entremets' characteristic of mediaeval feasts, of which the most grandiose and best documented is the Banquet du Faisan.

From the account given by Olivier de la Marche, no less planning and organisation went into this extravaganza

than into those orchestrated by Messisbugo, but the entertainments were designed to do more than entertain: as propaganda, their underlying purpose was to unite Burgundian nobles in a prestigious cause, namely the recapture of Constantinople. Olivier de la Marche marvelled more at the decorative and dramatic 'entremets' than at the foods, but he does give some indication of the sumptuousness: each platter included 48 different preparations, and the roasts were served from "chariots étofés d'or et d'asur".<sup>35</sup> Both foods and wines seem to have been served from large buffets, and the foods seem to have been on display as much as the allegorical tableaux, which, like exhibits in an art gallery, were inspected and admired by all the guests before they were seated and served, after which the parade of dramatic entremets commenced.

Another mediaeval banquet ("lo banquet", according to a contemporary observer) of which details were documented was the reception given by the count of Foix (Gaston IV) at Tours in 1458 in honour of the ambassadors of the king of Hungary. Its seven services were punctuated by four entremets, visual spectacles which included dance performances, and which were obviously designed to flatter the foreign officials as well as gain the appreciation and admiration of the audience.<sup>36</sup>

The distinguishing feature of these two banquets - separated by only five years - is the theatrical nature of the entremets, with their music and dance, costumed performers and improvised sets. The introduction of this

style of banquet was not simultaneous with the acceptance of the word into the vocabulary, since similarly lavish feasts had long been a tradition, yet it differed from the fourteenth-century feast, where the 'entremets' were based on elaborate culinary preparations. At the nine-course dinner given by Cardinal Hannibal Ceccano for Pope Clement VI in the mid-fourteenth century, the visual 'entremets' included an enormous 'castle' made of deers, wild boars, hares and rabbits, all cooked but looking very much alive, which was paraded around the room by the écuyers, to the accompaniment of knightly music from a motley of instruments.<sup>37</sup> (The meats were not, apparently, intended for consumption - at least, not by the official guests.) There was also a fountain, spurting forth five different kinds of wine, and surrounded by a variety of birds, all cooked but redressed in their splendid plumage. A mock tournament and a fencing display were presented as 'divertissements', and at the end of the dinner the chief cook, plus about 20 of his assistants, performed a supposedly impromptu dance, accompanied by their pots and pans, torches and bells, in a revival of what is said to have been an old Roman custom.

Both types of entremets relied on the same effects to amaze and impress - visual magnificence, an element of surprise and incongruity - but the entremets of the fourteenth century, whether or not they were meant to be eaten, were the product of the kitchen, elaborated under the charge of the cook. Maitre Chiquart, head cook at the Savoy court in the early fifteenth century, described how



to construct entremets such as a fire-breathing, gilded boar's head and a four-towered castle, surrounded by roast and gilded meats, befeathered birds, a wine-filled fountain and other extravagances.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, the entremets of the two fifteenth-century banquets, although retaining the elements of surprise and deception, were no longer the product of the kitchen, and no longer had any direct association with food.

It is as though the entremets had undergone a sort of mitosis, the culinary element being separated from the entertainment; henceforth the entremets was almost purely spectacle, while the elaborate culinary displays were not only edible but intended to excite the appetite and give pleasure to the palate. In the kitchen, this became translated into a greater emphasis on craftsmanship, an appeal to the sense of taste as well as to mediaeval aesthetics. The symbolic value of the food could stand alone.

#### RECONCILIATION OF SENSUALISM AND ASCETICISM: THE TEMPERATE MEAN

The Venetian centenarian - and reformed gourmand - Luigi Cornaro, writing at the age of 83 in 1547, described the banquets of the day as "truly immoral ...feasts so great and intolerable that the tables are never found large enough to accommodate the innumerable dishes set upon them, so that they must be heaped, one upon another, almost mountain high."<sup>39</sup> According to Cornaro, the

scales were so weighted in favour of sensualism that the intemperance which proceeds from the vice of gluttony "is exalted as a virtuous thing and even as a mark of distinction, while temperance is stigmatised and scorned as dishonorable".<sup>40</sup>

Like other moralists before and after him, Cornaro perceived his world in black and white; against reason, order and temperance he placed sensuality, chaos and excess. It was the intellectual humanist, Bartolomeo Sacchi - Vatican librarian from 1475 until his death in 1481, author of philosophical and historical works, biographer of the popes - who, writing under the name of Platina, was able to reconcile the two extremes in his doctrine of 'Honesta Voluptas', which might be roughly translated as 'Measured Pleasures'. Platina proposed that it is not wrong to derive pleasure from eating (in moderation) and that enjoyable eating is not incompatible with good health.

"I know full well that a number of unsympathetic persons will find fault with me, saying that I wish to encourage a life of ease and pleasure. But I speak to those who are so austere and full of pride and who voice judgment not on the basis of the experience of pleasure but by the name alone. What evil can there be in well-considered indulgence? For pleasure and health are called the mean between good and evil. ... I speak of that indulgence which is between the bounds of good living and of those things which human nature seeks."<sup>41</sup>

This philosophy expressed the essence of the

humanistic revival of the fifteenth century, the "cult of the individual whose happiness derives from intellectual and sensual enjoyment."<sup>42</sup> Platina - antedating by more than three centuries Brillat-Savarin, who similarly espoused an art of living centred on 'man as an eater' ("l'homme en tant qu'il se nourrit") - promulgated an ethical code which did not condemn the pleasures of the senses, although its rules demanded self-discipline and the exercise of discrimination.<sup>43</sup> His legitimisation of the pleasures of eating brought together the conflicting dualities of mediaeval life and offered the outline of a new and harmonious lifestyle.

Platina's advice covered the choice of the site for one's house ('for health and pleasure'); how and when to eat, to play, to sleep and to exercise; how to further the enjoyment of life. It was formulated on the basis of the individual, and in this respect shares with mediaeval medical doctrine a belief in the individuality of each person (in each person is a unique combination of the four basic humours), while at the same time differing from the universality of Church doctrine. The example of sexual intercourse illustrates perfectly the opposing viewpoints; the Church condoned sexual intercourse, between married partners, for the purpose of procreation, but Platina - while conceding that it has a useful purpose, preservation of the species - added that it can also be a legitimate source of pleasure. How often one ought indulge in this pleasure depended not on a predetermined set of rules but on characteristics of the individual, such as his age, and

on other variables such as time of year.

Platina can be called the father of Renaissance gastronomy, and his book a synthesis of all previous gastronomic writings. In content it combines the Persian traditions of sensualism, the anecdotal trivia of Athenaeus, the mediaeval principles of medicine and dietetics, the culinary refinements of Martino. It is significant that Platina's work came from a Mediterranean region - Italy - where the conditions which favoured the emergence of Humanism also favoured the development of a coherent philosophy in which the contrarities of mediaeval life could be reconciled.