

BETWEEN HISTORY AND LEGEND: FOOD, CULTURE AND POLITICS AT THE ESTE COURT OF FERRARA - A PSEUDOSCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO REIGNING.

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Abstract

Gastronomy, by which I mean the *pleasure* and the *luxury* of the dinner table, was always a passion of the ambitious Este family. They were rulers of Ferrara from the beginning of the 13th to the end of the 16th centuries. The Estensi, as they were called, fancied fine clothes, elaborate ceremonies, beautiful art works and succulent food. Today's Ferraresi have adopted many of their customs and habits. If they can afford it, that is. The Este laid a splendid table. Famous chefs, such as Cristoforo Messibugo, whose name is still revered in culinary circles, spent their time inventing dishes for the many courses that typically made up one of these gargantuan feasts. And what a sparkling life was lived in those splendid times!

When I grew up in Ferrara in the 1960s and early 1970s very few people seemed to remember the city's glorious past, the castle moat had become one of the favorite dumping grounds to rebellious teenagers who would throw in it outdoor bar furniture, bicycles and whatever else they found lying around late at night. The breathtaking castle was in need of repairs. Via delle Volte with its arches and cobblestones had become home to prostitutes and small-time thieves, the wall surrounding the city was crumbling down. The Estensi's work had been lost, not only through fire and earthquake, but also due to civic disregard.

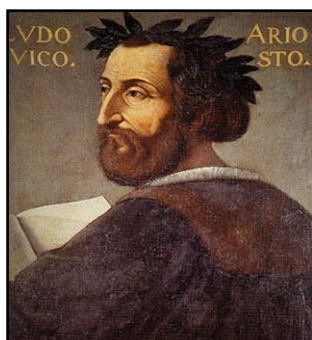
Keywords: Politics, Culture, Food, Estensi, Ferrara

Introduction

There was a time in Italy when countries/territories were city-states. The Este family ruled Ferrara, a city of the Po Valley, from the beginning of the 13th to the end of the 16th centuries. They loved art, food, and they were skilled politicians. They left an architectural legacy and gave the city an unmistakable identity, comparable to none.

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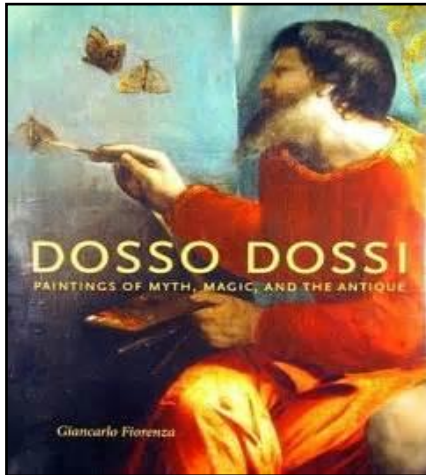
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The roots of culture and civilization of the inhabitants of this magnificent city of the Po Valley may be found in the verses of Lodovico Ariosto, considered by many to be one of the greatest Italian poets along with Dante Alighieri, Torquato Tasso, Petrarca,

Ugo Foscolo, Giacomo Leopardi, to name a few. Ariosto was also known as "the Brilliant Madman of Renaissance Literature." Those roots are also to be found in the paintings of Dosso Dossi and other members of the Ferrarese Painting School, and of course in the Este's sumptuous parties and banquets.



Under Ercole I, who is said to have led the courts of culture, as well as in generosity great castle that today defines the the idea of the joyful feastings court one of the most magnificent

At the time the castle was appearance from the present one, northern limit of the town; it imposing towers: Lions, Paolo, and Santa Caterina. They formidable appearance of the

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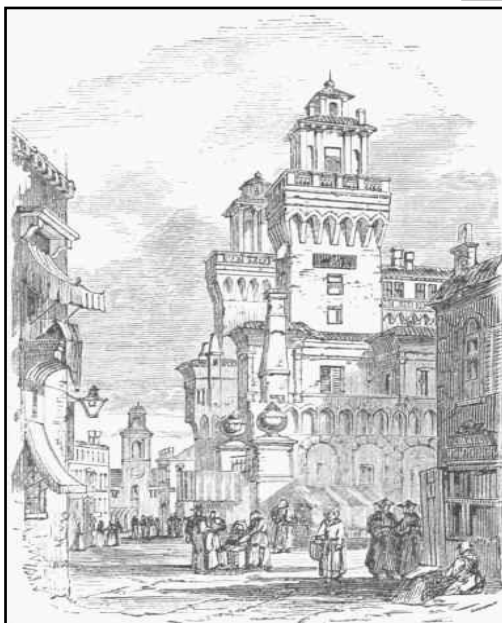
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Among the rulers of Ferrara, Ercole I d'Este, the second duke, is specially remembered for his parties, banquets and tournaments. He graced his court with poets,



musicians, painters, intellectuals, and above all beautiful courtesans. have created modern their times in art and and hospitality. The heart of Ferrara suggests that made the Este in Renaissance Italy.

very different in its it stood at the extreme incorporated four Marchesana, San contributed to the stronghold.



Only after a long time did the Este decide to transform the fortress into a residence for their court. Starting in the second half of the 16th century they undertook considerable renovation works. Indeed, one of the most rewarding experiences of the construction process was inspired by the duke's commitment to the highest possible standards of workmanship, which was embraced by the builders. First, they built a wing connecting the castle and the ducal residence (the present Town Hall), and enlarged the Tower of Lions and the Marchesana Tower. Then they constructed kitchens on the ground floor and the pretty hanging garden on the main floor *giardino pensile*, the one above street level, which we would call the second floor, but the Estes refer to it as the "*Piano Nobile*." Finally, in the second half of the 16th century, after the damage caused by a great fire in 1554 and by an earthquake

in 1570, the transformation from military fort to elegant residence was completed. Grand staircases, spacious halls, monumental arches and richly carved decorations became the background of the sumptuous life at the court of Este.

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Alfonso II continued the tradition of Ercole I and spent lavishly on art and culture. However, there was also a political motive for his lavishness. He realized that Pope Pius V intended to make the territory of the court of Este part of the Papal States in order to squeeze to gain the Pope's respect if not his affection. The chronicles say that he surrounded himself Florence, the pontiff's enemy. Alfonso's strategy was smart and effective. He laid out a plan with many powerful, clever, courtiers. Ariosto himself was surprised to find so many nobles at the court. In the *Cassaria* he tells Lucrano "That there are so many here, money must run



loose in the streets and gold must pour like rain." To him, the picturesque customs of the Este court were nothing more than "pomposity and fumes."



Subsequently, he lunatic and spent the rest of to the Ospedale Sant'Anna.

How treacherous Este could be!

During their parties and tournaments so much gold, bounty, and good food was passed around that even the poor Ferraresi benefited from it. It would seem that the Ferraresi and their wealthy guests were enemies of the melancholic life. Their life was one party after

Do you really think that life was any different than nowadays? Let's not forget these intellectual hangers-on were paid by the Este for their services, which meant writing flattering things about them. Few dared to speak honestly about their employers. As a matter of fact, when Tasso dared to do so he found himself in the castle prison, located in the Tower of Lions.



was declared a his life confined

those fun-loving

another. Any occasion was worth celebrating, whether it was the arrival in the city of a new captain, a marriage, or the conclusion of a fishing/hunting tournament. Every ceremony ended with a succulent banquet accompanied by a cascade of *Lambrusco Frizzante* or *Vino di Bosco* (the latter is a local red wine produced at the Este summer residence at Bosco Mesola, on the Adriatic Coast, near the breathtaking Abbey of Pomposa).



Here is how Sir Cristoforo Messibugo (at least to my memory of it) the greatest of all of the Este's chefs, describes a Rabelaisian four-course dinner offered to Girolamo Giglio by Duke Ercole II during the carnival of 1536. The table was set with perfectly white tablecloths on which were laid finely wrought forks, spoons and knives, sparkling crystal glasses, beautifully decorated plates, ornamental salt and pepper holders and shining candelabums.

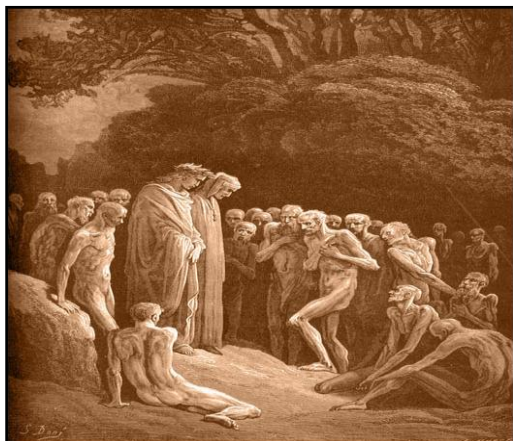
In front of each setting Cristoforo placed a piece of bread in the shape of an animal such as a pig or a chicken. This is the first record we have of any kind of bread different from the commonly used round loaf. Falcons made of sugar or carved out of fruit also adorned the table. The antipasto included various salads, four kinds of salami, four types of sliced beef tongue; capons stuffed with a mixture of wild boar meat, bread crumbs, Parmesan cheese, parsley, rosemary and nutmeg; and last but not least, a plate of puff-pastry partridges with Turkish rice.

Now, I don't know about you, but I am getting hungry!



The first course included twenty pheasants; pork roast for forty, scores of roasted partridges topped with a French creamy garlic sauce, Gorgonzola cheese and butter. Calories and fat, here they come! Then, ten boneless capons sautéed in liver sauce, fried slices of salami with sugar, wild boar soup with pine nuts, and ten ducks blanketed in dough.

The second course consisted of ten capons in a red peppery sausage sauce; thirty one pigeons-Lombardy style-with thirty-eight pieces of yellow sausage and cabbage; ten pheasants stuffed with prosciutto in regal sauce. Let's continue with the menu, there is more! Pork loin; turtledove soup; and ten barbecued baby turtle doves.



These were the animal lovers of the time: they loved to eat them!

The third course was a potpourri of pasta with olives, oysters, sugar, pine nuts, pistachio, pears and butter. Because the chef cut the butter curly shapes, that resembled lamb's wool, the dish was called *pasta alburrito lanato*.

Those still seated for the fourth course

(while the others would fight for a space in the courtyard to, shall we say, make room for more comestibles!) watched as five hundred oysters decorated with sliced oranges and lemons were carried to the table. The meal ended with rose water. At bed time, each surviving guest received fresh grapes, sugar water, apples, lettuce and watermelon syrup to ward off insomnia and heartburn. And just in case any unpleasantness occurred during the night, a huge ceramic bowl was placed at each bedside.

No wonder Dante found a place also for gluttons in his Inferno!

When it came to love for cuisine, the Estensi were not alone among the courts of Italy. At Pesaro, a city on the Adriatic coast not far from Ferrara, during Costantino Sforza's marriage to Camilla d'Aragona in 1475, the celebration was so extravagant nothing like it had ever been seen before. The wedding cake replicated one of the twenty-four castles of the city. Chronicles tell us how during the festivity gold apples were thrown to the guests and to the populace as they ran wildly through the streets. One thousand gold coins were given to painters, musicians and other artists engaged for the occasion. And from the fountain in the main square, wine poured out instead of water.

And everyone was sooo happy!

They didn't have to worry about DWI laws; they just let their carts be pulled home by oxen, mules or horses.

When the Estensi heard of the celebration Pesaro was mounting they decided to outdo the rival city. On the occasion of the arrival of Beatrice d'Ungheria (sister of Elenora d'Aragona) they built a tunnel of sugar and hazelnuts on the main street and put white wine in their fountains too.

As you see, the idea of outdoing the Jones' did not originate in American suburbia. Nossignore! Here comes the kicker!

Among the Estensi's extravagant parties, the one planned to celebrate the marriage of Alfonso I d'Este, in 1503 to the sexy Lucrezia Borgia, was one of the best. Guests ate 300 quality cows – none of them from England of course (subconscious premonition and fear about mad-cow disease), 300 wheels of Parmesan cheese, 1500 birds, and the same number of rabbits. At the table, guests confronted halves of watermelons into which a single red grape had been placed to honor Lucrezia's celebrated... a picture is worth a thousand words.



like a pear, usually served
hallmark of *salumerie*
since then; *cappelletti*



During

Lucrezia's time, many
typical dishes of Ferrara
originated, among them
are: *salama da sugo* (a
pork sausage – shaped



with mash potato), which has been the
(delicatessen) in the city of Ferrara



(stuffed pasta shaped like little hats); *brazadela*
(a type of Italian sweet quick bread – shaped like
a big donut, usually hanging from the waiter's
right arm, while with the left hand he would
pour wine into glasses); and *pampepato* (a
round, sweet cake typical in many Italian
cities, available mostly during the holiday
season).



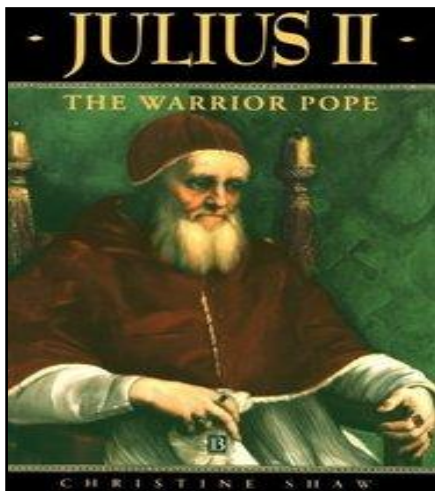


Please forgive me for the following digression, but this information has been passed down in my family for centuries. I must have had an ancestor among the people I'm about to mention. The beautiful Lucrezia, who became popular with the ordinary people of Ferrara (my ancestors were among this class), is remembered as a brilliant flame that attracted many trembling moths. According to the tale, she loved to sunbathe in the nude on the *giardino degli aranci*, a garden/balcony of the castle that

overlooked the main street. Men fought duels to gain the best view of her. That is how the duchess achieved stardom and found a place in everyone's heart, and in many discrete alcoves, including that of Pietro Bembo (Renaissance cardinal who wrote one of the earliest Italian grammars and assisted in establishing the Italian literary language *lingua aurea*. So it is written in my family history book!

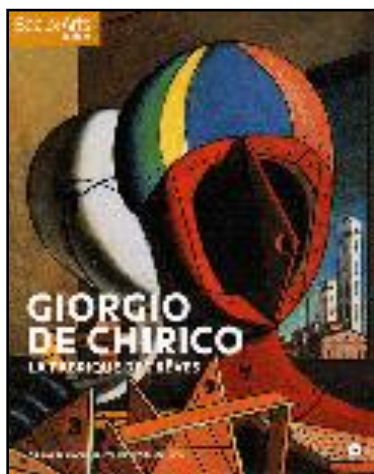


While devoting themselves to the delights of food, the members of the Este court did not neglect the pleasures of the soul. They especially cultivated music and theater with great passion. Regardless of the expense, they brought the most renowned musicians to the court. And the most fanciful machines were invented for theatrical scenery. The salons of the *Piano Nobile* resounded with verses of Boiardo, Ruzzante and Tasso, and with musical concerts often performed by courtesans. Between dances and banquets, the dukes took care of government affairs. Being expert statesmen, they also attended to the town military defense. At a stone's throw from the castle there was a large arsenal where Alfonso I developed his expertise at warfare. Here he fabricated extremely powerful weapons to which he gave



picturesque names like *Gran Diavolo* (Great Devil) and *Terremoto* (Earthquake). Heaven melted down a statue of Pope Julius II to make a *culverin* (a small cannon), out of it. And make no mistake about it; he called the new armament *Giulia*. Who was Julius II anyway? Pope Julius II (5 December 1443 – 21 February 1513), nicknamed *il papa terribile* (the fearsome pope) and *il papa guerriero* (the warrior pope), born Giuliano della Rovere. He was the head of the Catholic Church from 1503 to his death in 1513. His papacy was marked by an active foreign policy, ambitious building projects, and patronage for the arts—he commissioned the destruction and rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica, plus Michelangelo's decoration of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

God keep me from my enemies was the Este's motto. As a matter of fact, the House of Este was not tender with either its enemies or its friends and relatives. Nicola III, for example, did not hesitate to sentence to death his very young wife, Parisina Malatesta, and her lover, his stepson, Ugo. The marquis did not have any compassion for them, even though he had many love affairs himself. He fathered many children; so many, in fact, that the inhabitants of Ferrara still say: "On this side and on the other side of the Po River, we are all children of Nicola." Well, perhaps I was influenced by Washington's fame on this one, but it sounded so good I could not resist the temptation. What about Alfonso I? He locked up for life his brothers Giulio and Ferrante when he found them guilty of conspiring against him. On these occasions, the castle's Tower of Lions became the prison of those unlucky protagonists whose romantic and tragic histories poets and writers have immortalized. There are other stories to tell here – more subtle perhaps, but no less interesting. The castle appears serene, even sublime, when enveloped in thick early winter fog, enticing local and visiting pedestrian alike. All of this gives me not only a sense of pride, but also of renewed respect for the later civic leaders who focused their energy and political influence to restore the architectural landscape of this magnificent city of the Po Valley.



These are old-fashioned stories. Stories I like to tell. But even in the present day, less inclined to enthusiasm and legends, the great towering bulk of the *castello* stands as a symbol of Ferrara. It has been accepted by everyone: from the enigmatic painter Giorgio De Chirico, who interpreted its subtle metaphysical atmosphere; to the local association of bakers, who print its image on the paper bags they use for fragrant Ferrarese bread.

To this Buffalo State professor, it is a far away reminder of the extravagant life and treacherous history of the Este family. For generations they guided the culinary, cultural and political destiny of my beloved hometown.

Conclusion:

Historical research can be exciting and frustrating at the same time. Research can be a creative proposition, following one's findings in sometimes unexpected places which lead to more questions related to questions already answered. Something magical, sometimes called scholarship happens, when imagination and documentation blend into something meaningful and appealing. In this creative history of the Estense family I have tried to illustrate the creative genius of these



Renaissance rulers and their political scientific savvy to reigning. In today's society, more than ever, we need to speculate about our past if we care to best predict our future. We use it every day subconsciously, and in doing so we become imaginative and disciplined scholars. In the end I hope for nothing more but to have educated you some and entertained you at the same time. Grazie a tutti, or is it prego?

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