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Peasant food on elite tables, or when festive meals become a daily habit

Comida popular à mesa da elite ou quando as refeições festivas se tornam um hábito diário

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Abstract
Elite cuisine and popular cuisine are distant and often conflicting worlds, even ideologically. However, on a practical level, we can observe crossovers and hybridizations between the two cultures. This appears to be true today, when several emerging chefs exalt "poor" cuisine. This was true in the nineteenth century, when bourgeois cuisine used to transform festive peasant dishes into dishes for everyday use. It was already true in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when recipe books written for the tables of lords used "poor" products and reworked rural gastronomic practices and habits. Despite the ideological contempt they have been subjected to for centuries, peasants have indirectly participated in the construction of contemporary gastronomic heritage. The case of Italy, on which the paper focuses, can be taken as an example – unless it is a glaring exception.

Keywords:
Elite cuisine, popular cuisine, Italy, festive meals, gastronomic heritage.

Resumo:
A cozinha de elite e a cozinha popular são distintas, conflituando, por vezes, entre si até do ponto de vista ideológico. Porém, em termos práticos,

é possível observar cruzamentos e hibridizações entre as duas culturas. Isto parece verificar-se ainda nos dias de hoje, sempre que os chefs elogiam a dita cozinha "pobre" e já era verdade no século XIX, quando a cozinha burguesa transformava pratos populares confecionados nos dias de festa em refeições quotidianas. Também sucedia o mesmo na Idade Média e no Renascimento, quando os livros de receitas elaborados para as mesas dos senhores usavam produtos "pobres" e recriavam práticas e hábitos gastronómicos rurais. Apesar do menosprezo sofrido ao longo dos séculos, os camponeses participaram indiretamente na construção do património gastronómico contemporâneo. O caso de Itália, no qual este artigo se foca, pode ser tomado como exemplo – a menos que seja uma manifesta exceção.

Palavras-chave:
Cozinha de elite, cozinha popular, Itália, refeições festivas, património gastronómico.

Feast in the church, noise in the kitchen[1].

In every time, in every place, in every culture feast means food. This is a fundamental anthropological assumption, expressed in different ways depending on the historical context, reflecting the actual relationships inside a society and the specific interests of each social group. I will address the topic referring to medieval Europe, with a particular focus on Italy.

Feast and food

Popular culture is not (as some scholars maintain) a simple reflection of high culture, the result of an imitative process, but rather it expresses autonomous values and interests[2], peculiar to the subaltern classes[3]. The

1 Lapucci 2007: 554: «Festa in chiesa, rumore in cucina».

2 An autonomous food culture and way of eating of the subaltern classes is supported by C. and Ch. Grignon, 1980-8: 531-569. See Poulain 2002: 166-167.

3 Teti 1976: 236: «the feast has been studied [by anthropologists] as a spontaneous and autonomous expression of the subaltern classes», even if it can also represent a «concretization

connection between feast and food, present at all social levels, has its own specificity in peasant culture, working as a "food counter-model"[4] based on the abundance and goodness of food, in a context characterized – at *that* social level – by the fear of hunger if not, sometimes, by actual hunger. In *that* context, the festive banquet is intended to exorcise the fear of hunger and propitiate the well-being of the community.

The land of Cockaigne, a great utopia of the medieval imagination, is a place where everything is food, *therefore* everything is feast. Four are the Christmases, four the Easters, four the Candlemas, four the Carnivals. Ordinary days are present too, but… they are all Sundays[5].

This utopia embodies the to eliminate the distance between the daily and the festive, making the festive daily – that is, well eating. The connection is simple and immediate, it also appears in proverbs and sayings that have reached modern times. What is Easter? A 14th century English writer gets straight to the point: «Easter is a day of joyful refection and feeding»[6].

In addition to representing a break, a distance from everyday life, feast usually accords with natural rhythms, the cycles of sowing, harvesting… This also brings to a privileged relationship with the rural world: an archaic relationship, a true archetype that precedes the "Christianization" of feasts, a great cultural event that affected the medieval centuries. Easter, the feast of rebirth, the heart of Christian liturgy, reconfigures ancient feasts held around the spring equinox: among the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons the goddess Eostre was honored in that period – hence the name *eosturmonath* that designated the month of April. What may surprise is that the English word Easter has been derived from that root, showing a nominal, as well as substantial continuity[7].

This is just one example of how, in the Middle Ages, the Church appropriated agricultural feasts, so constituting an "agro-liturgical cycle"[8]. The most decisive

of interclass ideology, as a realization of social control and instrumentalization of the needs and demands of the poor».

4 Quellier 2015: 102-103.

5 Schmitt 2016: 672. Cf. Franco Jr. 1998; Pleij 2001.

6 Henisch 1976: 53.

7 Gautier 2006: 62-64.

8 Quellier 2015: 70.

intervention concerning food was to assign two opposing dietary typologies with annual and weekly rhythms: "fat" and "lean" periods and days, differentiated by the permissibility or prohibition of eating meat and animal products. These rules changed over time, with important differences on a regional scale. Anyway, they governed food consumption throughout the Christian world, at least until the 16th century when the Protestant Reformation rejected them[9].

Feast and meat

In medieval imagination, as well as in the daily practices of the population, the idea of feast largely coincided with eating meat – at all social levels: among lords, who exalted meat as a sign of strength and power[10], and placed it at the center of daily consumption; among peasants, who had it available more occasionally but, if they could, did not fail to eat it on festive days; among the clergy and the monks, who abstained from it (in different ways) as a sign of humility, except recovering it to honor an illustrious guest or, precisely, a feast.

A beautiful episode told by Tommaso da Celano in the biography of Saint Francis[11] tells that once, when Christmas fell on a Friday, his companions were discussing what to do: celebrate the holiday with a meat-based lunch, or respect the abstinence of Friday? They sent one of them to ask Francis directly. He got angry and answered brusquely: doing penance in a feast day is not admissible, indeed, it is a sin. Everyone must participate in Christmas celebration: men, animals, the birds of the air. And why not inanimate objects, why not the walls? Feast is not just eating, but eating together. Everyone. Men, animals, things. But walls cannot eat, so, Francis continues, let's make them participate in the banquet in a different way: «I want», he says, «that on a day like this even the walls eat meat, but since this is not possible, at least let's spread them with it on the outside». This is a powerful image. The greased walls are the hyperbolic image of a bond between feast and meat that in medieval culture appears unbreakable.

9 Montanari 1993: 141-145.

10 Montanari 1993: 19-23.

11 Tommaso da Celano 1986: 487-488.

A plastic representation of this bond is the "battle between Carnival and Lent," a literary topos that began in the Middle Ages and will last for centuries. This "battle" is the major variant of the contrast (in reality, an alternation) between fat and lean, where fat, that is, meat, symbolizes and even personifies feast. The two armies clash and Carnival shows up with its ranks of chickens capons, roosters and hens, geese and cranes, pigs and wild boars, sheep, quails, partridges, pigeons, to which animal fats (lard, butter) and cheeses and dairy products are added. Lent is also well armed and defended: fish and shellfish of all kinds support it, and eggs, and legumes and vegetables and fruit. The battle is uncertain, but Christmas arrives to help Carnival, with its supply of hams and sausages. At this point Lent foresees defeat and prefers to negotiate an honorable surrender. Carnival will allow it to return every year to occupy its space (that is, its time) for a few weeks[12].

How many feast days?

In the Middle Ages, Christian law is committed to promoting Sundays as days of feast. On that day, dedicating oneself to prayer and abstaining from work is mandatory, just as mandatory – as a social convention but also a prescription – is to eat more and better, possibly meat. Even monks, who observe strict rules of food control, are forbidden to fast on Sundays[13]. This prescription is continually reiterated by normative texts, both ecclesiastical and secular – for example by the capitularies of Charlemagne[14] – while the lives of the saints tell of peasants struck by divine fury because they dare to take up the hoe or the plough on a feast day. Work done on Sundays prolongs the suffering of Christ: this is taught by a singular iconography

12 Lozinski 1933. An Italian translation, as well as an extensive bibliography on the subject, in Lecco 1990.

13 This is still true in the modern age: «everywhere the presence of meat food characterizes the Sunday table», writes Cabantous 2013: 366. According to Quellier 2015: 69, the statement is a bit exaggerated. But in essence it is acceptable, and can be dated back to the Middle Ages. Not even in contemporary society has the connection really disappeared, even if, today, pastry making seems to have taken on a «particularly rich symbolic charge», somehow taking over that of meat. See Claudian and Serville 1970: 305.

14 *Admonitio generalis*, c. 81, in *Capitularia Regum Francorum*, MGH *Leges*, I, n. 22, 61.

attested in the Alpine regions of medieval Europe, between France, Italy, Slovenia and Austria: it's the so-called "Sunday Christ" surrounded and tortured by work tools[15]. We can deduce that the practice of weekly rest did not take hold without encountering resistance – but land inventories from the early Middle Ages suggest that the days of corvée for dependant peasants were six per week[16]. And the English agronomist Walter of Henley, in the 13th century, takes it for granted that the plough has to remain still for eight weeks a year[17].

In addition to Sundays, in addition to solemn feasts (Easter, Christmas, Ascension, Pentecost...) there were feasts dedicated to the Virgin, to the Baptist, to the Apostles, to the patron saints of each province or region. In monastic centers, more feasts were "commissioned" by the king, or a local lord, in memory of someone who was to be guaranteed a good welcome in the afterlife. These practices were more or less widespread depending on the period and the country: more numerous when (and where) the royal power directly controlled the monasteries, providing them with lands and resources in exchange for prayers, masses and banquets in memory of deceased family members or, in perspective, themselves. The logic that presided over these practices was a sort of circular equation: good governance guarantees well-being, that is, an abundance of food; festive banquets are the result of this abundance; in turn they serve to propitiate the stability of the sovereigns and their good governance, as well as their eternal life. These food rituals have a religious and political meaning as well. «It's not a question of living to eat, but of eating so that the donor lives eternally»[18].

For the Carolingian age, Michel Rouche tried to measure the impact of these occasions on the daily diet of monks and canons. The results are

15 Schmitt 2016: 568-572.

16 So in the "polyptychs" (inventories of lands, peasants and incomes) of the early Middle Ages.

17 *Walter of Henley and other Treatises on Estate Management and Accounting* 1971: 315: «Yowe know well, that in the year there will be 52 weeks; nowe take out eight of theise weeks for holydays and for such other letters and soe theare remayne 44 weekes workable. And in alle this tyme the ploughe hath not to tylle». In the other important text on medieval agriculture, that of the Italian Piero de' Crescenzi, the only thing that is recommended to the *vilicus* is that «feriae serventur» (Petrus de Crescentiis 1995: 57): but it is a quote from the Roman agronomist Cato (and not Varro as Crescenzi suggests, perhaps quoting from memory).

18 Rouche 1984: 265-296, 275.

impressive: in royal monasteries over 60 days of anniversaries and related feasts per year can be found; in some cases, they are as many as 70, 80, 100. A significant part of the liturgical time is dedicated to banquets, with a very high consumption of meat and wine, or beer (liters per person). For a total of perhaps 8-9.000 calories, Rouche guesses[19].

We can therefore understand the attempts, by abbots more sensitive to the theme of monastic spirituality, to stem the proliferation of feasts, both in number and in the quantity and quality of food. Benedict of Aniane, when promoting in the 9th century a general reform of monastic life, tried to force monks to consume meat only at Christmas and Easter (and only poultry, as prescribed by the Rule of Benedict)[20].

Anniversaries were always linked to the day of death of the person to be remembered. Celebrating the day of birth was a pre-Christian practice still alive at a folkloric level, seen with suspicion and sometimes explicitly condemned by the Church. According to the Saxon poem *Heliand* «the birthday celebration is a custom of the people»[21] but, as we read in an 11th century homily by the Anglo-Saxon abbot Aelfric of Eynsham, «we must not make the day of our birth a day of feast [...] but we must think of our last day»[22], which opens the doors to immortality while birth introduces us among mortals. With the exception of Christ and his closest family members (his mother Mary and his cousin John the Baptist) the Church excluded this type of celebration from the official liturgy[23].

Folkloric practices also included banquets on the tombs of the dead, the so-called *refrigeria* repeatedly banned by religious authorities, therefore, evidently, still alive among common people[24]. Hincmar of Reims left these practices to the laity, prohibiting them to the clerics[25].

19 Rouche 1984: 275-277.

20 Archetti 2016, II: 757-795 (see 788-789 the restrictive rules imposed to monks at the beginning of the IXth century by the council of Aix, welcoming the requests for reform promoted by Benedict of Aniane).

21 Gautier 2006: 67.

22 Gautier 2006.

23 The birthday feast became widespread only in the 17th century, as a new profane and non-religious custom. Schmitt 2016: 627 ff.

24 Gautier 2006: 69.

25 Gautier 2006: 72.

Daily feasts

Festive banquets, copiously documented in monastic tradition, also appear among the aristocratic elite, linked, in this case, not so much to religious occasions as to political dynamics. For example, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition the king was used to gather and host the magnates of the kingdom at his court, to reaffirm his dominant role through the common banquet and the colossal drinking sessions that were an integral part of it. For centuries, there was an almost "royal monopoly" on major celebrations, with a clear emphasis on their political significance even if they were held on Sundays or religious occasions.

Then again, there were the wedding feasts, which served to weave political alliances through family ties. Here too, feast coincides with the banquet. Wedding *is* the banquet, it *is* the collective drinking session[26]. It's true that, on a theoretical level, «the only bond that confers indissolubility to marriage is carnal copulation», as Hincmar of Reims wrote in the 9th century[27]. But the table is an essential complement to the bedchamber, and in collective perception just the table is the decisive moment of the celebration, when the public, social recognition of the gesture takes place. In many wedding stories, the bedchamber is not even mentioned[28].

Among the elite, wedding celebration can last days, weeks, months – according to the dignity and prestige of the figures[29]. According to Donizone's *Vita Mathildis*, the wedding between Boniface of Canossa and Beatrice of Lorraine, celebrated in 1037, lasted three months[30]. Three months of banquets: *per menses ternos fiunt convivia*.

Wedding and banquet overlap perfectly, according to the mechanism of consequentiality that I already highlighted: wedding is a feast; feast is eating and drinking together; wedding is eating and drinking together. *To drink a feast* is still said in English, with an expression derived from the

26 Carreras 2001.

27 Maraschi 2014: 261. Similarly, a formula by the jurist Antoine Loysel, 16th century: «boire manger coucher ensemble, c'est marriage ce me semble» (Maraschi 2014: 200).

28 Maraschi 2014: 218, note 241.

29 Maraschi 2014: 178.

30 Donizone 1984: 84.

ancient Scandinavian tradition (*drekka þeir veisluna*)[31]. Similarly, in that tradition, such an expression as «wedding beer» simply means a marriage[32].

On these occasions everything takes on hyperbolic proportions and the ostentation. Nothing is spared[33], the display of wealth reaches paradoxical levels. During the three months of the wedding between Boniface and Beatrice, «spices were not ground in a mortar, but ground like spelt in water mills»; wine was drawn «from the bottom of a well»[34]. Nothing is said about the menu, but we should be aware that spices, like wine (that we assume to be of excellent quality) are *normal* presences among the powerful. They are a sign of excellence that distinguishes the lord's table from the peasants' one. This distinction, far from being exceptional, is daily. What can make it exceptional on certain occasions is only its measure.

Missing feasts

While documents provide us with much material about the feasts of religious and political elites, very little we know about the common people, the "poor" or *pauperes* – a term that medieval texts preferably use in a social rather than economic sense, to denote what today we would call the "subordinate classes", the humble, the "weak" as opposed to the powerful[35].

Sometimes we are said that the *pauperes* were given the leftovers from monastic banquets, or that some *pauperes*, representing the community as a whole, participated in the feast[36]. Then there are the alms given directly to the *pauperes*, sometimes with the indication of the foodstuffs intended for them[37]. "Feeding the poor" is a recurring clause in testamentary

31 Maraschi 2014: 193-194, 239.

32 Maraschi 2014: 66. Gautier 2006: 78-79 observes that the expression is also found in Anglo-Saxon England, but rather as a residue of a relationship with the Scandinavian world: if in the latter the identity feast = wedding is absolute and elementary, among the Anglo-Saxons it is rather the wedding gift that represents the entire ceremony; the feast represents only the environmental framework.

33 Maraschi 2014: 157.

34 Donizone 1984.

35 Montanari 1979: 451-453.

36 Gautier 2006: 228.

37 Montanari 1979: 456.

provisions, even if, paradoxically, in such provisions the role of the "poor" is totally occasional. As Jacques Le Goff pointed out, they simply *serve* to perform a rite whose aim is the salvation of the soul of the donors[38].

On "popular" celebrations in the strict sense, documentary insights are sporadic and casual[39]. But it's also true that the topic has not been studied so much. In particular, it would be interesting to investigate whether, beyond the daily diet of the peasants, that we can somehow reconstruct[40], there were special dishes for this or that feast. I believe it would be important to answer this question, because popular cuisine must have been particularly sensitive to festive dishes.

A careful analysis of literary sources could prove fruitful. For example, the link between the calendar of feasts and gastronomic specialties appears in a short poem by Simone Prodenzani, who lived between the 14th and 15th centuries in central Italy. It is included in a series of sonnets, of modest literary commitment, in which Prodenzani describes the customs of a noble court following the footsteps of an imaginary Pierbaldo, lord of Buongoverno. At a certain point Pierbaldo asks his jester to tell him about his wife, whom he describes sarcastically, complaining about the woman's excessive gluttony and the fact that she takes advantage of every holy occasion to gorge herself on the ritual food of the day[41]. It is no coincidence, I believe, that the link between food and feasts is evoked here when the jester's wife, a simple woman, a woman of the people, is evoked in the noble context. Is it fair to assume that those dishes were *inventions* of popular cuisine?

Piero Camporesi wrote that popular cooking, having an essential and long-term purpose such as daily survival, tends to be conservative and

38 Le Goff 1966: 723-741; 737.

39 For example, Bede tells of a Breton traveler who arrives in a village and enters a house where the inhabitants are gathered for dinner and are feasting (*epulant*). He sits down with them and shares the *convivium*, that is, the feast. (Gautier 2006: 55.)

40 Montanari 1979.

41 *Il "Sollazzo" e il "Saporetto" con altre rime di Simone Prudenzani d'Orvieto*1913: 134 (*Liber Saporecti*, 80): «If you knew the devotion that she has in Christmas lasagna, in the *farrate* of Carnival, in the cheese and eggs of the Ascension, in the goose of All Saints and macaroni of the Fat Thursday, and also in the pork of Saint Anthony and in the Easter lamb, I could not say it in such a short sermon. For all the gold that is under the stars, she would not leave the Candles' day without eating a quarter of fritters; sweet and strong wine is still very good for her, and she would never put water in it because she says that it helps every evil».

repetitive, while aristocratic or bourgeois cuisine, in a context of food security, can allow itself to vary and innovate[42]. This assumption has an indisputable basis of truth but must be scaled down, starting from the very topic we are considering here, that of festive dishes. In the world of the *pauperes*, celebrating feasts meant a temporary exit from the daily routine. The meaning of these feast days and celebrations must have been particularly strong on an emotional level, certainly more than among the social elite, who had no interest in breaking away from everyday life. Enriching and varying the diet on festive days must have been an important goal especially – if not only – for ordinary people. That's why I believe that popular cuisine is not at all incompatible with invention and creativity. Invention and creativity could be expressed in the preparation of some meat – that of farmyard animals, more familiar to the peasant experience – and, perhaps more often, by reworking the basic resources of the daily peasant diet, vegetables and starchy foods. The "sweet" breads that were prepared at Christmas, perhaps with the addition of dried or candied fruit, signified the desire to enrich everyday bread, magically transforming it into festive food[43]. Interesting recipes could emerge from this kind of practices, to be presented only exceptionally in popular menus but also accepted (enriched and reworked) into the canon of haute cuisine, here substantially deprived of their festive meaning.

Popular (festive) recipes?

The presence of "popular" recipes, flavors and tastes in medieval haute cuisine has been, for Italy, amply demonstrated[44]. Did festive dishes from popular tradition flow into this heritage? This is an idea that does not seem to be unlikely. I would love to explore it further but at the moment it remains a hypothesis.

As an example of possible research tracks, I would like to quote a text that I find particularly interesting. It refers to the monastery of Camaldoli,

42 Camporesi 1980: 67-85; 76.

43 Montanari 2016: 32.

44 Montanari 2012: 183-193; Ribani 2021.

in central Italy. It's a very particular monastery: not a place of power and abundance, like those of the Carolingian age I mentioned before, but a place of isolation and prayer, with headquarters in a place called Fontebono and, a few kilometers away, a group of "cells" (*cellae*) where the monks retreat in solitude. These hermits receive food from Fontebono and the "customs" (*consuetudines*) drawn up by Abbot Rudolph around the middle of the 12th century focus on the festive specialities that must appear on their table on Sundays and other solemnities – and we see that not even these "extreme" hermits can elude the obligation of the feasts, and their food corollary[45]. Given the cultural context in which their experience takes place, we can be sure that these are *poor* foods, which recall *peasant* uses and not aristocratic ones. That's why – not surprisingly – the main protagonists are cereals and legumes, occasionally enriched with cheese and fresh dairy products.

The reference to popular use is explicit by the first dish mentioned in the document: a small wheat pasta, «which people [*vulgus*] call little grains [*granelli*]». A rustic dish of spelt (a kind of cereal that medieval literature represents as rustic) is served at Christmas and Easter. Then appear, distributed throughout the different periods of the liturgical calendar, *torte* (pies) and *migliacci* (millet-based preparations), dishes of chickpeas and summer broad beans, *tortelli* and fritters (*frictellae*). The same preparations, and a few others, compensate for the hermits' menu on the days when blood sampling is practiced. As if to say that they are considered rich and nutritious foods (that's why they appear together with the festive ones). Here again the spelt dish reappears, and again the dish of *granelli*, and finally the "lasagne", *lagana*.

This text is the mirror of peasant poverty, which for Camaldoli monks represents a model of simple and humble life. So it helps us to give the right place, a poor social place, in the middle of the 12th century, to some gastronomic preparations destined to be widely successful in medieval Italy: the *torte*, pasta wrappers or pies, filled with various ingredients (I note that we already find them in some agricultural contracts of the early Middle Ages, as a "donation" given by peasants to the lords[46]); *tortelli*,

45 See Crosara 1970: 57-58.

46 On peasant "gifts" in early medieval agrarian contracts see Andreolli and Montanari 1983: 93.

smaller pies that in the following centuries will become a typical dish of Italian cuisine; "lasagne" which, if I am not mistaken, we find here for the first time in Italian medieval sources. A few decades later, the dictionary of Uguccione confirms their popular use when it states that these types of cut pastry, boiled and fried, *a vulgo dicuntur lasania*[47]. Accurate recipes for "lasagne" – as well as for "tortelli" and other pasta shapes – appear in Italian elite cookbooks from the 14th and 15th centuries. Books intended for the kings and the lords, which collect recipes from different sources: many of them are a result of the imagination and professionalism of court or palace cooks; others seem to derive from popular experience. Tracking them down and placing them in an "original" festive context is a delicate and risky operation, perhaps not impossible.

I think that the issue is worth to be carefully explored. I would like to continue on this line.

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47 Uguccione da Pisa 2004: 642.

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