

Astarita, Tommaso.

The Italian Baroque Table: Cooking and Entertaining from the Golden Age of Naples.

Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 459. Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2014. Pp. xii, 297. ISBN 978-0-86698-510-9 (hardcover) US\$ 65.

The Italian Baroque Table provides a valuable and enjoyable abridged translation of Antonio Latini's *Lo scalco alla moderna* (*The Modern Steward*), vols. 1 (1692) and 2 (1694). Astarita organized his translation of *Lo scalco* in much the same way that Latini did, presenting each of the twelve chapters that comprised vols. 1 and 2 of *Lo scalco* as chapters 1 to 12 in *The Modern Steward*. Sandwiching the translation in each chapter is a general introduction to the chapter's topic and relevant historiography, and a commentary on select themes.

With so few early modern books of domestic guidance extant, *The Italian Baroque Table* offers scholars a welcome collation of insights into the labour and service structures that supported foodservice and entertainments in seventeenth-century Neapolitan great households. Of particular importance is Latini's worldview: that of *scalco*, or overseer of great household diet provisioning and entertainments. It is from this perspective that Latini commented

on the departmental responsibilities of the kitchen, purchaser, carver, wine steward, stores clerks, and other departments involved in providing hospitality. Latini's perspective is important due to his intimate familiarity with, and willingness to comment on, the operational side of seventeenth-century great-household foodservice and hospitality. Whereas most of Latini's contemporaries (Messisbugo, Evtascandalo, Colorsi, and others) were content to discuss the qualities of ingredients, list recipes, give carving instructions, or some similar combination of information, Latini's explanations are much more detailed when it comes to the roles of the cook, kitchens, carvers, wine stewards, and the labour norms that facilitated execution of work and communications between "downstairs" departments.

Particularly welcome are Astarita's brief, accurate summaries of relevant current historiography, mostly contained in his chapter introductions and closing essays. Astarita was careful to consult current historiography for all of the many topics that Latini mentioned, but his care in coupling current historiography with Latini's varied discussions is particularly evident in the essays following chapters 5 and 8—essays examining the topic of early modern evolutions in French and Italian cuisines. This topic is often couched in terms of "revolutions" and sudden change, but more recent historiography is laying a compelling foundation for far more gradual change. Astarita is careful to note the very gradual and protracted nature of early modern shifts in European culinary styles, providing new readers with a credible foundation for understanding the topic, and seasoned readers with a welcome break from the often over-stated speed and scope of change.

Occasionally, Astarita overstates the significance of primary-source evidence related to food. When it comes to discussing topics such as the tomato, pasta, and certain varieties of vegetables, Astarita occasionally makes reference to "popularity" of items. Although it is not made entirely clear, one must assume that Astarita is making claims of popularity based on appearance of certain ingredients and dishes within cookbooks and associated literature of the time. Although chronological appearance of ingredients in contemporary medical and culinary literature is significant, these sources can never really tell us how "popular" food items might have been, or how closely medical advice was actually followed. As well, we know from surviving household accounts that some ingredients appeared nearly every day at each meal—for example, onions—yet they play a minor role in many of Latini's recipes, the majority of

which appear to be designed for entertainments. In addition, Astarita's introduction and essay in chapter 9 treat the rich and poor as monolithic in terms of a predilection (among the rich) for fresh pasta and an inability (among the poor) to regularly consume fresh pasta. These are minor problems, to be sure, but a greater narrative possibility for exceptions would have strengthened these aspects of the work considerably.

Astarita did well to include commentary on many different aspects of Latini's text, though one aspect seems left mostly unpacked: Latini's intended audience. Astarita did include brief speculation on the presumed audience, but many questions about intended readership arise from the format of the text, from the pains Latini took in providing highly detailed explanations, and from the refinement present in his prose. One gets the sense that Latini was writing for other household administrators; for some literate servants (but likely not for workers like cooks or wine servers); for nobles interested in discussions of better-organized households mixed with references to classical literature; for the interested public. Unpacking the importance of Latini's work to these and other groups would have offered a greater foundation for contextualizing Latini's discussions.

Overall, Astarita has produced a fine new translation of Latini and an insightful collection of comments about the themes that appear. Notwithstanding a few minor criticisms, Astarita deserves much praise for the careful, well-contextualized translation that he has produced, and for the well-balanced research and commentary supporting the translation.

RYAN WHIBBS

Chef School, George Brown College