ALLA CARTA
Dissertations Around a Table
The four elements – air, fire, earth and water – were intertwined with the humours, as were the seasons and astrological signs. So spring corresponds with blood, air and a sanguine temperament. It is also wet and hot. Summer is yellow bile, fire and choleric. It is hot and dry. Autumn is black bile, earth and melancholy, it is dry and cold. Lastly, winter is water and phlegm, it is cold and wet. The list goes on to include the planets, the stages in the life of man, the humoral dispositions of animals and even individual organs. It is worth underscoring that the elements, humours, temperaments are not just reflections of one another, they are instead contained in each other, and they explain the workings of the universe. Contemporary writing about food and ingestion often alludes to the idea of “you are what you eat”. Today this concept feels new and we forget that pre-modern medicine was based in part on ingestion and that pre-modern society viewed the world as a series of interconnected systems where the microcosm was inevitably a reflection of the macrocosm. The ingestion of a particular plant, animal or substance thus could not be an isolated event, but a highly powerful gesture – both symbolically and practically – whereby the ingested substance had an agency over the body it entered and in turn would react based on the composition of that particular body. Classical, Medieval, Renaissance and indeed Baroque kitchens were not the sort of places we envision today, nor were the cooks the kind of people we would imagine operating in these kitchens. The kitchen was also the pharmacy and the cook a pseudo magician. In periods of greater social anxiety he was also an exorcist. Alchemical laboratory is how Piero Camporesi described the Baroque kitchen, but this term can be stretched back in time to encompass the pre-modern world as a whole. The kitchen was at once a space in which substances were manipulated for the purpose of simple ingestion, but also for healing, for pleasure and for purification (of the body and the soul). In the grandest of kitchens, the cook was a sort of universal man serving a peacock that seemed alive or a fish that appeared to be swimming as instructed by the famous Renaissance cook, Maestro Martino.1 Presenting life-like animals at the table for banquets and feasts was a Roman tradition. The freed and enriched slave, Titus Flavius, in Petronius’ Satyricon, famously orchestrates a banquet in which a wild boar is served surrounded by baby boars made of almond paste. Once it is cut open, a flock of thrushes flies out into the banquet hall.2 Eating was something visceral with powerful effects. It could be an illusory game, where nature was symbolic and full of double meanings. Food brought science, art and religion together, rendering the boundaries between diet and medicine indistinguishable.

Blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. According to ancient medicine these are the four humours present in varying quantities in the blood stream of every living being. It was believed that each human being had an excess of one of these humours, thus determining their personality or temperament, respectively, as sanguine, choleric, melancholic or phlegmatic. The four elements – air, fire, earth and water – were intertwined with the humours, as were the seasons and astrological signs. So spring corresponds with blood, air and a sanguine temperament. It is also wet and hot. Summer is yellow bile, fire and choleric. It is hot and dry. Autumn is black bile, earth and melancholy, it is dry and cold. Lastly, winter is water and phlegm, it is cold and wet. The list goes on to include the planets, the stages in the life of man, the humoral dispositions of animals and even individual organs. It is worth underscoring that the elements, humours, temperaments are not just reflections of one another, they are instead contained in each other, and they explain the workings of the universe. Contemporary writing about food and ingestion often alludes to the idea of “you are what you eat”. Today this concept feels new and we forget that pre-modern medicine was based in part on ingestion and that pre-modern society viewed the world as a series of interconnected systems where the microcosm was inevitably a reflection of the macrocosm. The ingestion of a particular plant, animal or substance thus could not be an isolated event, but a highly powerful gesture – both symbolically and practically – whereby the ingested substance had an agency over the body it entered and in turn would react based on the composition of that particular body. Classical, Medieval, Renaissance and indeed Baroque kitchens were not the sort of places we envision today, nor were the cooks the kind of people we would imagine operating in these kitchens. The kitchen was also the pharmacy and the cook a pseudo magician. In periods of greater social anxiety he was also an exorcist. Alchemical laboratory is how Piero Camporesi described the Baroque kitchen, but this term can be stretched back in time to encompass the pre-modern world as a whole. The kitchen was at once a space in which substances were manipulated for the purpose of simple ingestion, but also for healing, for pleasure and for purification (of the body and the soul). In the grandest of kitchens, the cook was a sort of universal man serving a peacock that seemed alive or a fish that appeared to be swimming as instructed by the famous Renaissance cook, Maestro Martino.1 Presenting life-like animals at the table for banquets and feasts was a Roman tradition. The freed and enriched slave, Titus Flavius, in Petronius’ Satyricon, famously orchestrates a banquet in which a wild boar is served surrounded by baby boars made of almond paste. Once it is cut open, a flock of thrushes flies out into the banquet hall.2 Eating was something visceral with powerful effects. It could be an illusory game, where nature was symbolic and full of double meanings. Food brought science, art and religion together, rendering the boundaries between diet and medicine indistinguishable.

The medieval French novella, Le Lai d’Ignaure begins with twelve married ladies playing a game. One would assume the role of priest and hear the confessions of the remaining eleven who must reveal the names of their secret lovers. It becomes clear that all are having an affair with the same man, Ignaure. Together they plot to ambush and kill him, but upon his capture Ignaure is able to convince them to spare his life; he loves them all equally, he says. In exchange for sparing his life they demand that he choose one lover only. Upon return- ing to their respective husbands, the scorned women tell their spouses of Ignaure’s affair with the chosen one in an attempt to humiliate both. The husbands, however, realize what really has transpired and assassinate Ign

3 www.brown.edu/Departments/Islam_Studies/
What did the twelve husbands hope to achieve by committing this act of culinary violence? Had they themselves ingested Ignatius’s powerful organs they might have absorbed his sexual powers and regained their lost virility. Instead they fed them to their wives in an attempt to punish or “cure” them with the same ingredient as that of their betrayal.

To a contemporary audience, this may be easier to understand if one thinks of another old trick: to cure a hangover, drink on it. In fact this self-same remedy was recommended in the Middle Ages: "If you develop a hangover from drinking at night, Drink again in the morning, it will be your best medicine."

There are several early medieval novellas in which women are forced to ingest the hearts and occasionally the sexual organs of their lovers. Food historian Allen Grieco tells us to look at hunting practices, more specifically wild boar hunting, to better comprehend the story of the eaten heart. The wild boar was seen as a highly sexual animal often associated with lust, a cardinal sin. There are some works where lust, or lussuria is illustrated by a woman reclining over a wild boar, wild because the animal was considered savage. In one particular example, the centrepiece is Saint Francis in ecstasy. At his feet are two women, one wearing the garments of a man and the other a pink dress and holding a mirror to her face. Her pet, a wild boar, appears to be tamed by her presence. Perhaps she is more savage than he.

In hunting wild boar it was customary to divide the meat among the hunters as soon as the animal was killed. He who slayed the beast got the heart, the testicles, the lungs, the liver, and so on. The beast’s insides were fed to the hounds as a reward and because it was believed that by eating the animal’s vital organs, they would absorb its savage qualities. The line between dog and feral pig became blurred, and the dog a more successful hunter of the beast. Some of the most mythical hunters of the Middle Ages are said to have defied taboos and followed a similar diet, eating the organs of wild boar. But eating the heart or the testicles of a wild boar was a risky business; only the most experienced hunter could ingest the potent substances contained in the animal’s organs – the very substances that supposedly made the wild boar wild – without losing his humanity.

_Arte di Animalibus_, the medieval philosopher and theologian provides further evidence of the power of ingestion in a discussion of ‘the nature and humoral complex of snake venom.’

"Drawing from Aristotle’s _Secretum Secretorum_, he says: ‘A victim with a warm heart and wide blood vessels would give the snake’s lethal poison a clear path to the heart, but a cold one halts its flow allowing the venom to disperse in the blood stream.’"

Only the noble hunter possessed the constitution and, most importantly, the strength of character needed to benefit from the organs of a wild boar. And young cold-hearted girls could easily be turned into snakes. There was a hierarchical order that followed the structure of the universe. At the peak of the middle ages this order was reflected in social status, which dictated the foods that were appropriate for different social classes and different sorts of people.

The animals located at the top of the food chain were only to be eaten by those in the upper echelons of society whose sobriety and nobility was not just a matter of appearance, but embedded in their humoral nature. Grieco explains that “morally and medically speaking, it was dangerous to eat food that was thought to produce excessive overheating in the human body and therefore led those who were imprudent enough to eat this way directly from the sin of gluttony to the closely associated and even more dangerous sin of lust.” He is referring explicitly to the consumption of birds, especial those that fly at high altitudes and therefore belong to the element of air closest to fire. Sparrows were considered the “hottest” of the volatiles. In fact, the Renaissance Dominican preacher Giambattista Sanvallone wrote that they induced lust like no other meat.

The theologian Bernardino of Siena also warned of the dangers of im imprecation with one’s diet. He told the widows of Siena to stay away from foods that “heat you up since the danger is great when you have hot blood and eat food that will make you even hotter.” He goes on to add: “let me tell you, widow, you cannot eat this or that… Do not try to do as you did when you had a husband and eat the flesh of food.”

But the flesh of fowl could also be a useful medicine. The eleventh-century Arabic treatise, _The Ambassad or of Health_ provides the example of an old rheumatic man in the _al-Numa_, but it also illustrates the blurred line between cook and herbalist, and between eating birds for the purpose of increasing libido (through heat) and eating curative just like the one recommended to the rheumatic old man in the _al-Numa_.

Take a cock, three years in age, and fill it with the below-mentioned items, boil in twenty pounds of water till only five pounds are left; then five pounds of mulnessy, treacle and mithridate, an ounce each, anacardine honey, six ounces. The cock shall be well minced and a goodly sauce be made with all the ingredients, which shall then be left to boil for three days. It shall then be distilled in a bain-marie, taking care to plate a little musk and amber tied in a muslin cloth in the neck of the lambock. A quantity of four ounces shall be ingested every morning."

_Foods from Medieval to Modern_:

Florian’s ex libris is one of many examples of the use of herbs to purify the body, exorcise evil spirits, provide simple remedies, as well as cause hallucinations or even poisoning. In the prologue to Umberto

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1 Allen Grieco, ‘From roosters to cocks: Italian Renaissance fowl and sexuality’ in Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (ed.), _Convivialité a Travers les Ages_, (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), p. 112.

2 Ibid.


4 Allen Grieco, _From roosters to cocks: Italian Renaissance fowl and sexuality_ in Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (ed.), _Convivialité a Travers les Ages_, (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), p. 112.
What were we like in the days long before explicit and legal pornography? 

what is at the core of food, ingestion and medicine in the pre-modern world. The cause, the medicine and the poison. This dynamic paradox encapsulates 

Effects: Generates moderate humors. It is particularly recommended Neutralization of the Dangers: With mastic. Dangers: Bad for weak intestines. Usefulness: Good for the stomach, the chest, and for a cough. Nature: Moderately warm in the second degree, humid in the first. “Oil of Almonds Vinegar has more of a drying effect: it cools, makes a man thin, induces "Garlic, nuts, rue, pears, radishes, and theriaca are antidotes for deadly minus the moral suggestions. A selection below: The quantities they enhance coitus (for those who have not taken our vows, naturally), but too many bring on a heaviness of totity. […] Consider the pumpkin. It is cold and damp by nature and slakes thirst, but if you eat it when rotten it gives you diarrhea and you must bind your viscus with a paste of bran and mustard. And onions? Warm and damp, in small quantities they enhance coitus (for those who have not taken our vows, naturally), but too many bring on a heaviness of the head, to be combated with milk and vinegar. A good reason why a young monk should always eat them sparingly. Eat garlic instead. Warm and dry, it is good against poisons. But do not use it to excess, for it causes too many humors to be expelled from the brain. Beans, on the contrary, produce urine and are fattening, two very good things. But they induce bad dreams. Far less, however, than certain other herbs. There are some that actually provoke evil visions. The Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum and the Tacuinum Sanitatis, both medievals health treatises and how-to books, read widely across Europe and translated into all the vernacular languages, give similar advice, though minus the moral suggestions. A selection below: “Garlic, nuts, rue, pears, radishes, and thenica are antidotes for deadly poison.” “Vinegar has more of a drying effect: it cools, makes a man thin, induces melancholy, decreases the number of sperm, harms those of dry humor, and dries up the nter of the fans.”144 “Oil of Almonds Nature: Moderately warm in the second degree, humid in the first. Optimum: The fresh and sweet variety. Usefulness: Good for the stomach, the chest, and for a cough. Dangers: Bad for weak intestines. Neutralization of the Dangers: With mastic. Effects: Generates moderate humors. It is particularly recommended for temperate bodies, for adolescents, in Spring, and in the Eastern regions.”145

The Ancient Greeks used the word pharmakon to signify both the cure and the cause, the medicine and the poison. This dynamic paradox encapsulates what is at the core of food, ingestion and medicine in the pre-modern world. I like to think we were more subtle. A series of frescoes executed by Raphael’s workshop between 1517 and 1518 in Rome’s Villa Farnesina depict the profane myths of Cupid and Psyche. The festoons by Giovanni da Udine framing the fresco are inspired both by ancient Roman decoration and the excitement of the recently discovered New World, and depict some 150 different species of flowers and fruits. They are proof of the profound classical revival in Renaissance art and thought, while their embrace of nature demonstrates the huge departure from the deep suspicion of nature during the Middle Ages. Gone are the religious anxieties caused by the tension between contrasting pleasures and fears of the animal and vegetable kingdoms. They are nonetheless symbolic. Above the fresco of Mercury – the Greek and Roman messenger God, protector of travellers as well as commerce, thieves, communication (and divination), luck and indeed trickery – if you look closely, hidden in the forest of leaves, apples, pears, grapes and melons, there is a tick of the eye, a green pumpkin subtly penetrating an open fig. Needless to say, the pumpkin is explicitly phallic. Did I mention that there are birds fluttering around the neighbouring frame? But Vasari describes the detail better than anyone else: Above the figure of a Mercury who is flying, he made, to represent Priapus, a pumpkin entwined in bind-weed, which has for testicles two eggplants, and near the flower of the pumpkin he depicted a cluster of large purple figs, within one of which, over-ripe and bursting open, the point of the pumpkin with the flower is entering; which conceit is rendered with such grace, that no one could imagine anything better. But why say more?146 Priapus, the minor Roman God of fertility and protector of fruit, plants, livestock and male genitalia, is in fact always represented with an erect and oversizen penis.

So, once again we return to sex and food, but in this case it is stripped of lust, poison and murder, and it is wearing the mantle of fertility. And despite the episode of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit, or perhaps because of it, the vegetable kingdom never ceased to represent fertility in one way or another. One has just to look at its various forms and its double meanings. There is literature about the health benefits of different fruits, plants and vegetables, but perhaps what is more interesting is their significance within the wider cosmology of the pre-modern world. Camporesi opens his book The Anatomy of the Senses with the phrase: “Quid est malum? What is an apple?”147 and then he goes on to list the entire world. To paraphrase, the apple is a spherical symbol of totality, it is both male and female, it is at once paradise and hell, virtuous and sinful, of the earth and of the sky, solid and hollow. The apple, like other species born out of the humud earth, contained the principle generative ingredient found in all living things. Giovanni da Udine certainly intended to represent Priapus and his phallic pumpkin, however there can be little doubt that above all he wanted to represent and glorify life itself.

We can gather from exploring the realm of ingestion in the pre-modern world is the understanding of a profoundly sensual relationship with food and nature. The appearance, the smell, the taste and indeed the sounds and movement of the natural world determined the meaning, the very essence of each being. Observation and awe best describe our forefathers’ relationship with the natural world. Petrarch wrote in a letter to his friend Boccaccio: “We must write just as the bees make honey...not keeping the flowers but turning them into a sweetness of our own, blending many different flavors into one, which shall be unlike them all, and better.”152 Not by chance, honey was the food of heroes.