

# Garum: Rome's new library and museum of food

*Published 2 May 2022, with Matteo Ghirighini.*

It is impossible to avoid the past in Rome; indeed, the past is why so many people come to Rome. If you're interested in the history of food, though, there's been nothing to see since the pasta museum shut its doors, aside from a few restaurants resting on their laurels. A new museum, at the bottom of the Palatine Hill and facing the chariot-racing stadium, has put food history back on the tourist map, displaying the collection amassed by Rossano Boscolo, a renowned pastry chef. I was very fortunate to get a guided tour from the director, Matteo Ghirighini

**Matteo Ghirighini:** Actually, we are in a monastery. This is originally the monastery of the Olivetan fathers and on the first floor, here are exhibited the kitchen tools.

**Jeremy:** There are 10 very modern glass cases lining three walls of the room. Each of them is packed with stuff arranged more or less according to what they're for. The first thing that caught my eye was a copper mould in the shape of a lobster.

**Matteo:** This series of moulds is a very important series of moulds. This series that you can see here comes from the English royal kitchens, it has been made during the first years of the 19th-century and they are moulds for Charlotte cakes. The Charlotte cake is one of the most important modern piece of pastry. It has been invented by Marie-Antoine Carême; Carême at the time was the pastry chef for the royal family, so ... fake dishes. A cake that seems to be a lobster, but it's not a lobster. It's a cake. [chuckles]

**Jeremy:** Lots of lobsters and other shapes too like a bunch of grapes, several castles, and even what looked like a VW Beetle, but no Colin Caterpillar. More moulds of carved wood from the low countries for spiced Christmas cookies and gingerbread, and then a case of porcelain animals.

**Matteo:** Many, many ducks. They are French and inside each one you can find the paté of the relative animal.

**Jeremy:** I like the buffalo. I must confess I've never heard of buffalo paté.

**Matteo:** Well, the French can do it. No, actually, it's not a buffalo. It's a toro.

**Jeremy:** A bull.

**Matteo:** A bull. It's a bull paté, but it's quite rare. If you compare, we have a lot of ducks, goose and turkey, and so on, but only one bull. So it is not so common neither on French tables.

**Jeremy:** I guess beef paté. Yes.

**Matteo:** Other moulds from 17th century to create biscuits. They are Italian. You can see limbs and religious subjects.

**Jeremy:** These ones here, we've got legs and teeth. They remind me of the *ex voti* that you see in the churches where people have maybe ...

**Matteo:** I never thought to make this connection, but actually, they seem to be **ex voti**, religious **ex voti**. But these are moulds for chocolate.

**Jeremy:** Okay. Chocolate teeth. That sounds like something dangerous to the dentist.

**Matteo:** This showcase is dedicated to ice cream, ice-making, sorbets dated 1653, so it's a Baroque ice cream mould. Or churns for butter making. This is exactly a screw press, which you can press the pasta, and then the bottom, you create the pieces of pasta, changing the press, you change the kind of pasta that you realise.

**Jeremy:** Okay, we've come full circle around all the packed display cases. I could have spent hours with my nose pressed to the glass, but it was time to go upstairs to the other part of the museum, dedicated to books about food and cooking.

**Matteo:** This is my favourite part of the collection.

**Jeremy:** This is, like, the floor above that one, so it has a big high roof and it's full of glass cases, but not with things in them, with printed material.

**Matteo:** Yes. A lot of text here. We have the collection of the antique books, starting from the first printed cookery book.

**Jeremy:** This is not a facsimile. This is the actual book.

**Matteo:** All the books that you see here are original and the most part of the books are in first edition. This is the first edition of the Scappi, 1570. That is the bible of the Renaissance cuisine, with a lot of ingredients, because the aim of the Italian Renaissance court cuisine was to impress the guest, was to demonstrate the power and the wealth of the one who gave the banquet, so it is a very different cuisine from the contemporary one.

**Jeremy:** Well ... I'm not so sure.

[laughter]

**Matteo:** Well, it depends, it depends. We can say that it's a different cuisine from the domestic cuisine, from the contemporary domestic cuisine. Second part is the menu. You can see all the menus of the banquets created by Bartolomeo Scappi.

**Jeremy:** Are these now actual historical banquets ... Oh, yes, yes. It says lunch for fast day ...

**Matteo:** The fast day in March, for dinner. And you can see here, the list 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 for the first service, 12, 13, for the second service. Another 15 for the third.

**Jeremy:** This is a fast menu?

**Matteo:** A fast menu, yes. But you can't find meat inside. It's a fast day, but you have to eat 50 plates, 50 dishes, more or less. As I told you, this is the first printed cookery book, and these are technically illustrated, not allegorically illustrated.

**Jeremy:** This kind of cookbook is not really for domestic use. This is for the cooks of important families and households and Popes.

**Matteo:** Also this book has been printed to demonstrate the wealth and the power of the owner, of the patron of Bartolomeo Scappi. That was Pope Pius V.

**Jeremy:** It's wonderful having these books here and I'm thrilled to be able to see them. Are there plans to bring these cookbooks to life?

**Matteo:** Yes, of course. Actually we will provide a guided tour. The same more or less that I'm doing to you now, and in which, when we show you some of the books, some of the most important -- maybe for example, in that book there, that is the Latini Scalco 1692, printed in 1692. There is the first printed tomato sauce recipe. When we show you that book, you will have the opportunity to taste the first recipe of a tomato sauce that we are preparing for you at the time, in order to understand the differences between the first known tomato sauce and the one that we eat every day here in Italy.

You may find the first recipe with basil, that is the grandfather of pesto, or the first panettone, 1552. This is the first book dealing with only with cooking fishes, 1631. This is the first book that talks about malloreddus, a kind of pasta and so on.

**Jeremy:** Matteo is still very much the bibliophile, book after book after book, right up to modern classics, like the Silver Spoon and beyond. His office is also lined with books about food that aren't on display, and he was keen to show me the museum's latest acquisition, not yet properly catalogued.

**Matteo:** They are all menus from 1860, so just before the creation of the Italian state until 1955.

**Jeremy:** This is a collection of printed menus?

**Matteo:** Yes. Restaurants and official dinners, state dinners, government ... So you can find here, for example, the last menu of Torino capital because the first capital of Italy was Turin. Here you can see the last menu, the last dinner made before we moved the capital to Florence and Rome. For the menu of the dinner between the king and Garibaldi in 1859.

**Jeremy:** There are five or six boxes of those printed menus. That's going to take some sorting out and having seen the treasures, I

wanted to know about Matteo's background and how he sees the purpose of the museum.

**Matteo:** I come from the scientific books. Because when you create a museum, when you create a place in which you tell the story you have to be very careful and sure about the story that you tell. Otherwise, it's not a museum, it's just a show. One of the most important things that Boscolo had in mind when he started to think [about] the museum was to create a place in which you can bust some myths about cuisine. We treat our cuisine as something stupid, as something different from another science. It's like there are no sources. Italians think that there are no sources from the cuisine. Cuisine came from my grandmother's cuisine.

**Jeremy:** This idea that there is an authentic, genuine, historically accurate method. When you look at the books and the recipes that have come from the 15th century, 16th century, do you see things changing over that time in the written material?

**Matteo:** There are a lot of variants. You can find the same recipes created using different ingredients or with adding some ingredients or changing some ingredients. Here we talk about first recipes. This is the first recipe of a tomato sauce. Then we can also study, or we can also tell about how it changed during the centuries. For example, the first recipe of the tomato sauce, the one of Antonio Latini, written in 1692, is with *aceto* inside, vinegar.

Why? Because Antonio Latini created this recipe as a sauce for meat. Vinegar gives to the meat a better finish. Now the tomato sauce absolutely has to be made without vinegar, if you use them for pasta or for the other hundreds of ways in which we use it in Italy. It changed completely, but in the same time, they have a similar pattern. It's made in the same way with some ingredients less, vinegar, and some ingredients more, for example, pepper.

**Jeremy:** Makes me wonder what would Antonio Latini, who developed his tomato sauce in the Spanish court in Naples, what would he have made of today's most popular tomato sauce according to the internet. Marcella Hazan's, which features absolutely no vinegar and a butt load of butter.

That idea that the only true way of making something is the way my mother or grandmother made it is common enough. I'm not going to

argue about it, but origin myths. Those are always worth arguing about. As Matteo said, one purpose of the museum is to bust some myths. A lot of people will tell you for example, that Ada Boni invented that pinnacle of Roman street food, the *suppli*.

**Matteo:** The *suppli* is a ball of fried rice with ragu and cheese inside. Is a very common street food all over Italy, but especially here in Rome. The first printed recipe of *suppli* is by Agnoletti, that was a Roman cook, in his book of 1832.

He wrote the first recipe of *suppli* that we know. The original name of the *suppli* was the *surprise* because at the time there were the French here in Rome occupying Rome, and it was a way to sell this street food to the French. Usually, Italians think that the *suppli* are a 20th-century invention. Many of them believe that Ada Boni wrote the first recipe of the *suppli*. No. It has one century more of history. In the same way, there are a lot of fake news about Italian cuisine, but to fight the fake news, there is only one way: using the sources.

**Jeremy:** This goes back to the question of whether the book represents what ordinary people are doing. If you think about some of the fights in the history of cuisine ... carbonara. As you know there are four, five, six different explanations for the origin of spaghetti a la carbonara. Can you tell me from the books or from the sources what is the origin of spaghetti carbonara?

**Matteo:** Well, I'll be real unpopular. I personally like a lot to use the Occam's Razor. There is a problem, you have to choose the simpler solution. Well, we know that there is a very popular recipe during the 18th century and 19th century in Naples. That was *cacio e'uova*, so cheese and eggs as a sauce for the pasta. There were a lot of *Pastari*.

*Pastari* were guys who sell pasta the along the streets in the 19th century, selling this kind of pasta with this *cacio e'uova* sauce. Then the Americans arrived to the coast of Italy and the *Pastari* found a lot of new clients for the pasta. They were rich also. But how to sell more pasta to the Americans? Maybe using an ingredient that Americans like, or that Americans have. Because the military ration, the military supplies of food for the Americans, were full of bacon. Probably these *Pastari* added the bacon to the *cacio e'uova* and created the carbonara.

**Jeremy:** So far, so mythical, it's the usual story. But there is a kicker.

**Matteo:** Another little thing that you have to consider that the headquarter of the Allies army in Naples was in via Carbonara. Why don't we make a pasta a la carbonara? It makes sense.

**Jeremy:** I had never heard the storey about the via Carbonara.

**Matteo:** It was in via Carbonara, the headquarters in Naples. May be the case, maybe not. But in this case for the carbonara, we don't have any written source because the first known recipe of a carbonara is from 1952, inside a book printed in Chicago. Is not in an Italian book, but is in an American book. The first printed Italian recipe of a carbonara is from 1955, long after the first known carbonara dishes here in Italy.

**Jeremy:** I'm almost persuaded, I admit it. Matteo has another pretty unpopular opinion about perhaps the most famous meal in Roman history. The museum is very close to a cave called the Lupercale.

**Matteo:** The place in which the she-wolf fed Romulus and Remus. This is a myth. The same, we don't have any real sources about this information, but I don't know if you know that *lupa* actually in Latin was the word used for prostitute.

**Jeremy:** No, I didn't know that.

**Matteo:** You can choose, or a she-wolf or a prostitute fed Romulus and Remus. Because this could make me real unpopular here in Rome, but if you use the Occam's Razor, between a prostitute and a she-wolf, well ...

Transcripts are possible thanks to the generosity of Eat This Podcast supporters. If you find the transcript useful, please [consider joining them](#).