



A Salute to the Etruscan Origins of Tuscan Cuisine

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INTRODUCTION

Every human society, every culture is in harmony with the likes and dislikes of its own members, their natural habitat, their economy, even their interpretation of the universe around them. Consequently, the people of that society establish a choice of foods and develop a system to prepare and adapt them to their tastes.

In short, they create an original cuisine.

Unfortunately, the first written recipes available to us go back only to the fourth century B.C., which really isn't so long ago, I suppose, when measured in terms of eternity. These recipes were collected and published by the celebrated and extravagant Roman gourmet and the first cook book author, Apicius; therefore, the oldest recorded cuisine extant is that of ancient Rome. Centuries before those glorious days, however, the Etruscans told us in figurative form how they lived, what they ate, and how they enjoyed life. In a way, they gave us a picture book story of their dining habits. Paintings, murals, frescoes and other artifacts decorating their burial chambers provide these insights. In death, Etruscans wanted to be surrounded by those things they most relished in life.

The lessons of history also tell us that Greek culture influenced Etruscan culture, and that the Etruscans influenced Roman culture which, in turn, influenced the culture of Tuscany, indeed all of Western civilization, including, we can logically assume, some of our cuisine of today.

You might say this is a practical application of President Reagan's famed "trickle down" theory to the field of gastronomy.

A good example: pasta. In the Etruscan tombs at Cerveteri, north of Rome, we find a mural depicting a large table with raised sides on which servants mix flour with water. In the foreground are a ladle, a rolling pin and a cutting wheel.

Pasta!

But, before we go on with matters of the table, let us dabble momentarily in Etruscology.

Who were the Etruscans?

THE ETRUSCANS The Greek historian, Herodotus, claimed they were migrants from Lydia in Asia Minor. It seems they got to Italy by luck of the draw. According to Herodotus, a famine had plagued Lydia a millennium ago and King Tyrrhenus divided his people into two groups, one group emigrated, the other remained, and probably perished.

The Greek historian, Dionysius, born some four centuries after Herodotus, claimed this was all nonsense. He insisted the Etruscans "migrated from nowhere else, but were native to the country," meaning Italy.

Confusion over the origins of the Etruscans remains, even among language scholars. Some say their language was Indo-European, others deny it.

Such issues are irrelevant here. We do know with certainty that the Etruscans were a hard-working people with a sound economy based on industry and agriculture. They exploited - and exported - their mineral resources: copper, tin, lead, silver and iron. The geography, climate and ecology of their territory in central Italy offered bountiful harvests, just as the forests to the north supplied wide varieties of wood and game, and the Tyrrhenian sea provided fruit of the sea in great abundance.

The Etruscan empire burst on the world scene about the 9th century B.C. but two hundred years later began showing early signs of decay. The good, fun-loving life caught up with the Etruscans quickly. They turned soft.



First, there were the Greeks with superior military and naval powers. The Etruscan city-states always fought independently, hence they could be knocked off one by one. Then came the rising power of the young Roman republic, but the Etruscans gave them many a good battle. We all remember Thomas Babbington Macaulay's immortal description of Horatio defending the bridge:

Hew down the bridge, Sir Consul, With all the speed you may; I, with two more to help me, Will hold the foe in play.

Macaulay failed to mention, however, that the foe was the Etruscan ruler of the city of Cleusin, Lars Porsena, and, despite the poet's romanticizing, Porsena did take Rome.

Finally, the Gauls administered the coup de grace. But the Etruscans were really done in by the Etruscans. They were fatalists who saw their civilization lasting only eight centuries, so they failed to halt their decline creatively.

So much for the bad news.

ETRUSCAN FOOD Whether it caused their eventual decadence or not, Etruscans loved all of life's amenities which were best expressed at the dinner table.

As I said earlier, the fertility of Etruria gave to these people agricultural reaches beyond belief. They grew cereals such as barley, millet, panic grass (grass used for fodder) and rye, from which they extracted "puls," the precursor of today's bread. Beyond this came the cultivation of plants sacred to the Mediterranean basin: olives and grapes. Garlic and onions were very popular. Other vegetables included ceci beans, black eyed peas (the white variety was introduced in Italy after the discovery of the New World), fava beans, and lupins, legumes whose fruits were eaten either cooked or raw.

For fruit, Etruscans grew pomegranates, figs, grapes, blackberries, strawberries, apples, melons, not the large apples and melons we know today but very small, almost egg-like in size.

Of domestic animals, cows were prized for food, and pigs were highly cherished. So were chickens, ducks, geese, goats and sheep. They made cheese from the milk of cows and pigs which was served with olive oil and covered with the ashes of fragrant woods.

Large quantities of game were available from the thick forests of the north: hare, deer, wild boar. These forests were so thick, by the way, that they frightened the first Roman soldiers who invaded Etruria.

From the rivers, the lakes and the sea, Etruscans caught vast amounts of fresh fish, including tuna and tortoise eggs.

Their recipes showed they cooked fish stuffed with rosemary. They also roasted pork with rosemary or cooked pork liver with bay leaves. Honey was used to sweeten food and salt to preserve it. Meats were prepared on spits and grills; saucepans were used for boiling, and, of course, ovens for baking. Paintings found in a tomb near Orvieto depict a busy Etruscan kitchen. Beef, venison, hare, even a brace of ducks hang from hooks in the open air. One cook holds a frying pan over an oven's flames, another readies a saucepan, while vessels brimming with sauces and gravies stand nearby.

In another painting, a cook is shown chopping meat, which he will cook over a small open fire, while another cook pounds food with pestles, one held in each hand. Prominent in the mural is an elegant woman supervising a slave as he lifts a huge tray laden with food for the banquet, including bread, pomegranates and black grapes.

Incidentally, the Etruscan woman wasn't confined to domestic chores; she lead a remarkably free life. The modern feminist would find her a good example, so would mud wrestlers. Etruscan women wrestled men, conduct that scandalized Greeks and Romans whose women occupied a secondary place in society.

If Emily Post had ever been invited to dine at an Etruscan table, she would have experienced traumatic shock. Etruscans rarely used knives; forks were unknown; and spoons a rarity. They ate with their hands and used the soft part of the bread to wipe them clean; then they tossed the bread on the floor and rinsed their fingers in bowls filled with aromatized water.



Free-range chickens, cats and dogs roamed the dining room to pick up scraps.

Early in their civilization, Etruscans ate sitting on chairs; later, towards the end of the sixth century B.C., they acquired the habit of reclining on couches.

No three squares a day for the Etruscans, mind you. They ate twice a day from tables covered with embroidered cloths and precious pottery.

Sex also reared its lovely head at the table. Naked young men and women served diners to the sound of flutes. That society was big on flutes. The Greek writer Athenaeus, describing Etruscan love of music, said that "they kneaded their bread, practiced boxing, and whipped their slaves to the sound of pipes."

Etruscans enjoyed a good wine, too. They stored it in large amphorae and cooled it before serving, usually in ceramic or gold goblets. Their drinking ritual didn't differ from ours. They studied the wine's color, sniffed its bouquet and then downed it, often with much greater gusto than modern table manners permit.

Incidentally, our sophisticated 20th century enotechnicians boast about their advances in temperature-controlled fermentation. The Etruscans were ages ahead of them, though their techniques obviously differed. After crushing the grapes, the must was poured into clay containers which were buried deep in the ground. Here the temperature was considerably lower. When the fermentation cycle was completed, the wine was then stored in cellars located even deeper in the earth than the fermentation vessels.

Etruscan wine was well accepted by the Greeks. Why not? They introduced the vines to Etruria. But the Romans didn't care for it.

What's new about that? To this day, Romans like nothing unless they make it themselves.

The noted Roman historian, Livy, notes that wine may have precipitated the final downfall of Etruria, which was being invaded, year after year, by Roman troops. Livy tells the story of a Chiusi resident who, angered at a Gaul for seducing his wife, sold his tribesmen a sizable batch of inferior wines. This angered the Gauls and they took revenge by launching an all-out second front.

Ah, but this is not the time or place to talk of war. We'll return to a more pleasant subject: eating.

It can surely be said that the roots of today's recipes are ancient; however, with the passage of time, we have lost some of the original ingredients, replacing them with others more readily available, perhaps more preferable.

From medieval times to today, Tuscan gastronomy, just like Etruscan cuisine before it, is tied up to the agriculture of the area: the olive tree, the vineyard, vegetables from peas to leeks, variations of colors, from the green of kale to the white of the cannelloni bean, to the dark brown of the now almost forgotten chestnut flour. All of these things are in perfect harmony with the land that produces them.

There is one contradiction, of course, to this harmony of Tuscan vegetables. There always is. I refer to the enormous Tuscan T-bone steak, grilled on charcoal and served rare. This, we must admit, is the legacy of English noblemen, who, for hundreds of years wintered in Fiesole and San Miniato and demanded to be fed T-bone steaks from the long-horned Chiani Valley cattle, which, to them, was no different from Aberdeen or Angus. Tuscans called these steaks "bistecchi" and the rest of Italy, "fiorentine."

They say that the best way to get to know people is to study their eating habits. "Tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you who you are ..."

The cuisine of Tuscany's medieval towns (Siena, Arezzo, Grosseto, Chiusi, Val di Chiana) tells us not only who the contemporary Tuscan is, but who his medieval - and Etruscan - ancestors were. Enjoy your gastronomic research ...and buon appetito!