

Food Culture between East and West

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In 1545 Luigi Bassano, a Venetian subject from Zara who had lived in Istanbul, published a book about the uses and customs of Turkish life.¹ In particular, chapter 28 deals with «meat and other foods, bread and drinks». The author knew his subject very well. He was clearly familiar with Istanbul upper classes as well as common people and his digressions about food are full of first hand news. Reading his words we understand that he was not struck by ingredients. In fact, in those times, in his country too, as well as in Istanbul, one could find billy-goats, rams, sheeps, wethers, oxen, lamb, kids, and also mutton, beef, eggs, apples, pears, plums, sugar, rice, butter, cheese, milk, wine, spirits, beer, barley, millet, bread, cumin and even opium. The statement that the Islamic religion forbids pork seems to have been obvious for him. On the contrary, the fact that Turks did not eat veal needed an explanation: they did so because they thought that a cow without its calf loose its milk. Bassano thought that tasteless food, such as some Turkish sauces and even the sultan's bread, was queer: «the sultan eats bread as white as possible, but it is completely tasteless and I ate it and I thought I had lime among my teeth». The author stressed also some taste combinations he considered unusual: for instance, a soup made of rice, butter and almonds, as well as cumin and opium seeds put into the bread. He noticed the widespread use of roasted meat in Istanbul, cooked above all with pounded garlic. Turks consumed a great quantity of sheep's heads and feet and also a kind of minced meat-pie. In their taverns it was possible to find fried eggs and meat made «according to the Persian fashion». They had different kinds of bread: a big black round loaf, full of cumin and opium seeds but badly baked, since inside it remained underdone; there were also a very thin and burned bread and a white one with seeds, usually covered with butter and beaten eggs. Bassano realized that Turks, Jews, Greeks or Bulgars living in Istanbul cooked food in different ways and that the meal prepared in the houses were different from those sold in the streets. Christians and Jews sold wine but also Turks drank it. There were drinks made with apples, pears, plums, sugar and apples and also sugar and water; there was also a strong beer made of barley or millet, and a kind of spirits called «archenth». Bassano realized that Turks had neither blancmange, nor pies, nor ravioli, nor even so many sauces as in Europe. They seemed to look more to the useful and simple food rather than to the delicate and rich tastes

1 L. Bassano, *I costumi et i modi particolari della vita de' Turchi*, Roma (Antonio Blado asolano) 1545 (anastatica con introduzione di F. Babinger, Monaco di Baviera (Max Hueber) 1963), pp. 78-80.

and he concluded saying that they had no delicacy in cookery.

In his book Bassano gave a lively picture of Turkish gastronomy, as it was perceived by a contemporary European. At those times it was still under the influence of ancient nomadic customs and Bassano considered strange just this taste and this kind of food. Eating so much mutton and meat, in general, as well as using butter, was noteworthy for him, even if his contemporaries from central Europe probably would not have considered these customs so strange. The fact that he was a Venetian subject probably influenced his perception. Venice had a long tradition of contacts with the Byzantine Empire and Muslim markets and shared with the Levantine world a common Mediterranean taste, while Turks came from inner Asia and in the 16th c. they still retained some dishes of their traditional gastronomy. In the Middle Ages the Venetian way of preparing food was influenced by the presence in the city of thousands of slaves coming from different countries: Slavs from Russia, Tatars from Caucasus, Turks from Anatolia, Moors from North-Africa. In the pictures by Carpaccio there are negro gondoliers and servants, in those by Paolo Veronese negro boys serve dinners and hold candles while documents give information also about slave women. The presence of so many slaves in Venetian houses had a certain influence on the way of preparing food. Spices and other exotic products were sold on the Rialto market and it was easy for those working in the kitchens to reproduce the flavours of their homeland.²

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The same mixture of flavours existed in the Levant. In the course of centuries Ottoman cookery underwent several changes due to different cultural influences. The ancient Byzantine association, i.e. bread, wine and oil, mingled with the Turkish nomadic one, i.e. rice, sugar and butter, even if oil never became popular in Istanbul and was always used above all as fuel for lamps. New syntheses were created. In the first half of the 17th c. the rebellion of Balkan provinces reduced the quantity of meat available in Istanbul. Fish made its appearance in Turkish cookery and upper classes began to prefer the more expensive fresh water fish. Until then predominantly sea fish was eaten only by the heirs of the Byzantines. It is not by chance that the Turkish fish names derive from Greek. The only sultan who liked fish was Mehmed II, the conqueror of Constantinople, but the fact that he suffered from gout probably influenced his taste.³

At the same time some new kinds of food were brought to the Ottoman capital by Albanian and Anatolian immigrants. Roast liver and sausage were the food of poor fellows from Albania and they are probably the ancestors of «liver in the Albanian fashion» and

2 A. Fabris, *Venezia. Sapore d'Oriente*, Venezia (Centro Internazionale della Grafica) 1990, p. 11.

3 C. Boudan, *Le cucine del mondo. Geopolitica dei gusti e delle grandi culture culinarie*, Roma (Donzelli) 2005, pp. 161-166.

«sausage on the spit». *Pastırma*, i.e. meat of dried beef, and *suçuk*, i.e. beef sausage, came from inner Anatolia, together with Muslim, Greek and Armenian immigrants. *Dolma*, i.e. stuffed cabbage leaves, made their appearance in this period and soon gave way to stuffed vine leaves. Cakes such as *helva* and *börek* were prepared in many different ways, while the use of fresh milk, yogurt and *kaymak*, i.e. buffalo milk cream, became popular in Istanbul. American products too appeared in the bazars. Tomatoes and peppers became part of Turkish food, while Indian corn and potatoes were accepted, but with some reservations.⁴

Something arrived also from Europe. Since the 16th c., Venetians had often sent *grana* cheese, then called *piacentino*, as a precious and appreciated diplomatic gift, together with the softer *vicentino*. On the other hand, in 1682, the French ambassador, de Guilleragues, presented the sultan with a dish full of strawberries, a fruit then unknown in Istanbul. At the beginning of the following century customs of Versailles began to be imitated by Istanbul; at that time alcohol began to be considered a desirable French novelty: a grand vizier asked one thousand bottles of champagne and over five hundred bottles of Burgundy of the French ambassador, but only verbally and not writing.⁵ In the same century a sherbet mixed with alcohol began to be prepared in Istanbul. It was called *miski* (musky) and the sultan used to drink it before retiring with his women in the harem. The musky sherbet prepared in the imperial kitchens was so appreciated by the Ottoman upper class that it was sold by the palace cooks at a very high price.⁶

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Everybody knows that spices came to Europe from the East. Venetian merchants used to buy pepper and other products in Egypt, even if, before the end of the 16th c., this market had been replaced for Venetians by that of Hormuz, where they used to pay the same taxes as the Portuguese. From the Persian Gulf goods proceeded via Basra and Aleppo as far as the Mediterranean and, by ship, they reached the city of the Lagoon.⁷

Rice too was known in Venice at least since the 14th c. but, at that time, it was used predominantly in powdered form to thicken soups. Sold in spice shops it was very expensive. In the 16th c. rice growing was introduced in the Veneto and became so common that it became liable for duty in 1561. On the contrary it is only a legend that rice growing was

4 S. Yerasimos, *A la table du Grand Turc*, Paris (Actes Sud) 2001, pp. 46-49.

5 A. Fabris, *Artisanat et culture: recherches sur la production vénitienne et la marche ottoman au XVI^e siècle*, «Arab Historical Review for Ottoman Studies», 3-4 (déc. 1991), pp. 51-60; G. Oberling-G. Martin Smith, *The Food Culture of the Ottoman Palace*, Istanbul (Republic of Turkey-Ministry of Culture) 2001, p. 117.

6 *Dizionario storico delle vite di tutti i monarchi ottomani, dato alla luce da Vincenzo Abbondanza Romano*, Roma (Luigi Vescovi e Filippo Neri) 1786, p. 140.

7 M.P. Pedani, *Venetian Consuls in Egypt and Syria in the Ottoman Age*, «Mediterranean World» 18 (2006) pp. 7-21.

introduced in Sicily, during the Islamic period, in 883 A.D. The story began to circulate in the 18th c. and had origin in a forgery of Arabic documents. An abbot, Giuseppe Vella, acquired some valuable Arabic documents for a scholar of Palermo, and, when he could find no more on the market, he began to make forgeries. In one of Vella's false documents the introduction of rice in Sicily is reported.⁸

In the course of history Venice was saved many times from famine by Ottoman corn, usually coming from the Black sea regions. The Balkan provinces supplied chiefly animals: cattle and sheep were sent not only to Istanbul but also to the West. Those which reached Venice were butchered in the two slaughter-houses of San Giobbe and Lido. 18th c. documents witness that some Muslim merchants living in the city used to go there to slaughter the animals according to the Islamic rite.⁹

In 1585 the first news about both tea and coffee arrived in Venice and in Europe from the East. In that year some Japanese ambassadors reached Lisbon, Rome and Venice and their practice of boiling dry leaves in water was noticed as a peculiar custom.¹⁰ In the same period a Venetian bailo in Istanbul, Giovanni Francesco Morosini, saw a strange black drink and told his friends about it. Coffee had arrived in Istanbul in 1554, when a man from Aleppo, Şems, opened the first coffee-house in the city. The ulemas immediately condemned this drink since they thought it intoxicated. On the contrary some scholars praised it since it helped to keep awake. Finally, at the end of Murad III's reign, in 1591, the most important religious authority of the state, the *şeyhülislam*, issued a *fetva* (legal opinion) in favour of coffee. Until then people believed that roasting burnt the beans, thus becoming a lifeless thing, and for this reason eating them was unlawful. On the contrary, the *şeyhülislam* now said that beans were not burnt at all and that people could drink coffee. This legal opinion is probably the reason why Turkish coffee is less roasted than the others. Coffee became widely accepted in Istanbul only about a century later. At the end of the long war for Crete against Venice (1699), the victorious Ottoman commander-in-chief invited his official and offered them a cup of coffee. From this moment onwards the black drink became favourite also for the court and it gained a place of its own among the symbols of palace protocol.¹¹

8 P. Preto, *Una lunga storia di falsi e falsari*, «Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche», n. 6 (2006), pp. 11-38. About Vella's life, cfr. T. Freller, *The Rise and Fall of Abate Giuseppe Vella. A Study of Forgery and Deceit*, Malta (Pubblicazzjonijiet Indipendenza) 2001; Boudan, *Le cucine del mondo* cit., p. 172.

9 C. Luca, *L'importazioni di merci levantine nella Venezia del Seicento e del primo Settecento: la cera e i pellami provenienti dai Principati Romeni*, in C. Luca-G. Masi-A. Piccardi (a cura di) *L'Italia e l'Europa Centro-Orientale attraverso i secoli. Miscellanea di studi di storia politico-diplomatica, economica e dei rapporti culturali*, Braila-Venezia (Editura Istros) 2004, pp. 321-36; M.P. Pedani, *L'Islam a Venezia. presenze, influenze, immagini*, in print.

10 Y. Gunji, *Dall'isola del Giapan. La prima ambasceria giapponese in Occidente*, Milano (Nico-poli) 1985; *La scoperta e il suo doppio. Mostra commemorativa del iv centenario della prima missione giapponese in Italia*, Moncalieri (Cirvi) 1985; A. Boscaro, *Giapponesi a Venezia nel 1585*, in *Venezia e l'Oriente*, Firenze (Olschki) 1987, pp. 409-429; *The World and Japan. Tensho and Keicho Missions to Europe. 16th-17th Centuries*, Sendai (Sendai City Museum) 1995.

11 A. Saraçgil, *Generi voluttuari e ragioni di stato: politiche repressive del consumo del vino, caffè e*

The 18th century writer Vincenzo Abbondanza, who wrote a historical dictionary of the Ottoman Empire, tells us that the sultan used to drink a special coffee, which came directly from Mekka and was considered the best in the world. It never arrived in Europe but it was given by the ruler to his viziers as a precious gift. Those Europeans who tasted Ottoman coffee or sherbets usually considered them incomparable. It seems credible since at that time Istanbul upper classes were more interested in drinking than in eating: the former was for pleasure, the latter merely for living.¹²

Soon after the opening of the first caffè in Istanbul, the plant was introduced in Europe by a Venetian physician, Prospero Alpini from Marostica (1553-1617). In the years 1580-1584 he was in Egypt with the consul Giorgio Emo and he availed himself of the opportunity to study the flora. In 1591 he published a book *De Medicina Aegyptiorum* where he gave the first description of the plant¹³. Less than a century later the first coffee-house was opened in Europe. In 1640 in St. Mark's square in Venice, under the vaults of the *Procuratorie*, a caffè opened in the Istanbul fashion. For a long period the coffee houses in Venice had Turkish furniture while the black drink was served in oriental china cups, seasoned with cardamom, since only in the 18th century it began to be sweetened with sugar.¹⁴

Another coffee house was opened in Vienna after the siege of 1683. The Austrian interpreter Georg Franz Kolschitzky, of Polish origin, found several sacks full of black beans in the Ottoman camp after the enemy's flight; he took them and so opened a coffee-house in *Domgasse* in Vienna in 1686. According to a tradition just an year before another caffè was opened in the same city by a Greek, Johannes Theodat. However, Kolschitzky is said to have invented the way of filtering the coffee and, above all, of mixing it with milk, creating the *cappuccino*. According to a legend, this drink was named after the capuchin (*cappuccino* in Italian) Marco d'Aviano, who preached to the troops before the last fight with the Ottomans.

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The 18th c. French fashion was set in Istanbul by the travel of the Ottoman ambassador Yirmisekiz Mehmed *efendi* to Paris.¹⁵ He attended several official dinners and the contrast with those to which he was accustomed was striking. The former were social meetings where conversation was expected to be entertaining, clever and full of lively humour. The latter were reserved and purposeful moments, where conversation was unnecessary according to

tabacco nell'Impero Ottomano nei secc. XVI e XVII, «Turcica», 28 (1996), pp. 163-194.

12 *Dizionario* cit., p. 139.

13 P. Alpini, *De Medicina Aegyptiorum*, Venetiis (apud Franciscum De Franciscis senensem) 1591.

14 D. Reato-E. Dal Carlo (a cura di), *La bottega del caffè: i caffè veneziani tra '700 e '900*, Venezia (Arsenale) 1991; T. Plebani, *Acque negre, acque salse, acque levantine: il caffè, Venezia e l'Oriente*, Milano (Silvana) 1991.

15 Yirmisekiz Mehmed Çelebi, *Le paradis des infideles* (tr. J.C. Galland, sous la direction de G. Veinstein), Paris (La Découverte/Poche) 2004.

the proverb *evvel taam, ba'deza kelâm* (first food, than speech). At the Topkapı small and low tables, around which at most four persons could seat, were brought briefly into the Ottoman council (*divan*) hall to offer a quick and light relief during a working day. At Versailles a decorated dinner room hosted a crowd of guests seated for hours in high-back chairs arranged around a long U-shaped table.¹⁶

Other ambassadors followed Yirmisekiz Mehmed *efendi*. After the French revolution, in 1797, the first Ottoman resident ambassador in France, Morali Seyyid Ali *efendi*, went to Paris to meet General Napoleon and the *directoire* and remained there until 1802. The report of his mission does not refer to food. He cites only flowers, fruits and cakes among the presents he was given in Marseille. He describes the official reception and says that French authorities presented him with cakes, coffee, incense, rose-water and sherbet, according to the Ottoman etiquette, to honour him.¹⁷

In fact, in Istanbul food was an important element of palace protocol. To understand this we can read the letters of a Venetian *bailo*, Francesco Venier, who made his official entry into the sultan's city on 20th September 1745. Just before presenting the doge's letters to the great vizier he was presented with coffee and cakes and he had to eat and drink together with the viziers, the *reis effendi* (head of the chancellery) and the *çavuşbaşı* (head of the imperial messengers). The same day he was received also by the sultan. First of all, after his arrival at the Topkapı, he had to wait near the second gate to see the ceremony of janissaries hurrying to their *çorba* (soup). Some writers record pilav rice and mutton was given to the soldiers on occasions of this kind, but this food was too rich and expensive, while the janissaries's ordinary soup was made of rice, meat and many vegetables.¹⁸ Then, there was the meeting in the council hall to see the presentations of petitions to the *divan* which was followed by the payment of a company of soldiers. Since the sultan's reception was held in the afternoon, at this point a meal was served. Venier seated at the same table of the great vizier while the most important members of his retinue were at the *reis effendi*'s and *defterdar*'s (treasurer) tables. On 24th September the former *bailo*, Giovanni Donà, went to the Grand Vizier's country house (Çırağan Sarayı) to receive the dismissal letters. During the ceremony he too was presented with coffee, cakes and perfumes.¹⁹

As we can realize from this short description food played an important role in the Ottoman

16 Ö. Samancı, *Culinary Consumption Patterns of the Ottoman Elite*, in S. Faroqhi-C.K. Neumann (eds.), *The Illuminated Table, the Prosperous House. Food and Shelter in Ottoman Material Culture*, Würzburg (Ergon Verlag) 2003, pp. 161-197; N. Halıcı, *Ottoman Cuisine*, in K. Çiçek (ed.), *The Great Ottoman-Turkish Civilization*, vol. 4, *Culture and Arts*, Ankara (Yeni Türkiye) 2000, pp. 93-103.

17 S. Yerasimos (ed.), *Deux Ottomans à Paris sous le Directoire et l'Empire. Relations d'ambassade*, Paris (Actes Sud) 1998, pp. 70, 86, 88.

18 *Dizionario* cit, p. 103.

19 Venetian State Archives, *Bailo a Costantinopoli*, b. 84, n. 8. Cfr. about other ambassadors' receptions: D. Kolodziejczyk, *Polish Embassies in Istanbul or how to sponge on your host without losing your self-esteem*, in Faroqhi-Neumann (eds.), *The Illuminated Table* cit., pp. 51-58.

ceremonial language. An official reception began with coffee and cakes because of their meaning: the former meant friendship, the latter was an invitation to say only sweet words. To give the daily ration of food to the janissaries was the Grand Vizier's first business of the day. A great silence fell on the second court when he entered the gate: hundreds of dishes were lined on the ground in front of hundreds of men, as we can see in some pictures made by the painters Guardi and Jean-Baptiste van Mour.²⁰ At this point, the Grand Vizier said: «May your morning be auspicious.» and a wave of soldiers broke ranks shouting to rush to their food. Foreign ambassadors often recoiled in terror, but the janissaries' shouts meant that they accepted the sultan's food and no rebellion was in the air. The ceremony of *çorba* was arranged both to impress with the strength of men nourished with the sultan's food and to demonstrate the loyalty of troops. In the symbolic language of the Palace overturning soup kettles meant insurrection.²¹

In Ottoman tradition the most important meal of the day was in the evening, usually taken at home. A light and hurried lunch was used only to give some relief during a long working day. There were not gala dinners for foreigner ambassadors till the 19th century when Western protocol was assumed also by the sultan's court. On the contrary, talking of state affairs around a laid table was considered greatly unpolite. Keeping silence was considered much more tactful, as well as eating and, then, drinking and, lastly performing the hand-washing using a napkin. In this way a person showed his personal and spiritual cleanness. The widespread use of chickens and birds during imperial official lunches suggested a link between the Heaven and the Topkapı, considered an earthly paradise.²²

It is very probable that most European ambassadors did not understand the meaning of what they ate or saw in Istanbul during an official reception. They were accustomed to the huge banquets of their courts but in the Topkapı they were presented with snacks of coffee and cakes or with light and hasty meals, made of unrefined food but only of soup, chicken and sherbet. Even if the ingredients were more or less the same, the symbolic language of food was very different in Istanbul and in Europe.

20 A. Bettagno (a cura di), *Guardi. Quadri turcheschi*, Venezia (Electa) 1993, pp. 86-87, 110-111.

21 Oberling-Martin Smith, *The Food Culture* cit., pp. 75-78; M.P. Pedani, *Il cerimoniale di corte ottomano: il ricevimento degli ambasciatori stranieri (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, in E. Concina (a cura di), *Venezia e Istanbul. Incontri, confronti e scambi*, Udine (Forum) 2006, pp. 23-29.

22 H. Reindl-Kiel, *The Chickens of Paradise. Official Meals in the Mid-Seventeenth Century Ottoman Palace*, in Faroqhi-Neumann (eds.), *The Illuminated Table* cit., pp. 59-88.