

## The Galenic Cook. Why Cooking and Medicine Were Two Aspects of the Same Culture.

Since antiquity up to and behind the seventeenth century, cooking was essentially perceived as ‘an art of combination’. Very few foods, apart from bread, were thought to possess a perfectly balanced nature. In the vast majority of cases some form of intervention (*antidotum*) – such as adding liquid to certain meats or boiling them in water to make them moister or conversely roasting moister meats to make them drier– was needed to correct the nature of the food and to establish the appropriate balance. “Venison is eaten boiled,” wrote Anthimus in the sixth century in his treatise on diet. “Roasting is good if the deer is young. But a roast of venison is heavy if the animal is old.”<sup>1</sup> An appealing flavor was important, since another essential principle of this system of cooking and nutrition was that, in order to be properly absorbed by the body, food should stimulate the digestive juices and provoke pleasure. Therefore, in his “On Right Pleasure and Good Health”, Bartolomeo Sacchi (1421–1481), later known as Platina, opts for the solution that seems most instinctive (Milham 1998: 127): “Some say that the bad effect of melons is settled or restrained by a drink of vinegar and sugar, or vinegar and honey. Some, like Avicenna, suggest water, others wine. I agree with human nature, which seeks wine... because it is a sort of antidote (*quoddam antidotum*) against the coldness (*frigiditatem*) and stiffness (*rigorem*) of the melon.” If a particular food was too hot, it had to be made colder by being combined with cold ingredients and so on, according to the four elemental qualities –hot and cold, dry and moist– of the humoral science.

Food combination, together with the choice of appropriate cooking methods, was an important stratagem for a healthy person and, as a result, is a compelling subject of study because of its reflection of pre-modern medicine. That a good diet ensured health was a

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<sup>1</sup> Anthimus, *De observatione ciborum*, 6, p. 52.

fundamental concept of ancient medicine, since food could cause disease or restore health through its effect on the balance of humors.

In this paper, I will investigate how certain culinary combinations became customary over time. Why were cheese and ham or wine used for warming or drying out the nature of pears and melons? Why were green beans tempered by “sprinkling oregano, pepper, and mustard on top” and drinking clear wine with them? In order to answer these questions, I will focus in particular on Galen’s most important dietary work “On the Powers of Foods” (AD 180). A definitive guide to a healthy diet, based on the theory of the four humors, “On the Powers of Foods” generally follows earlier treatises on the subject (i.e., by Diocles, Mnesitheus, Philotimus and the Hippocratic treatise *On Diet*), by relating the foods that can be matched to the temperaments of particular patients.

Finally, I will explain why Galenic dietetics may cast light on many instructions in the recipe collections for the cooking particular foods.

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