

Signora Onorata Elisabetta Foscari's *cena con amici* (dinner with friends)

One of my favourite things to do is to have some friends around for dinner as this gives me an audience on which to test period recipes. I can imagine my persona, as a 16th century Venetian Lady of a sociable nature, would also enjoy having some friends around in the evening for good food and good conversation, although I don't think she would have done the cooking as I do!

The best place to turn to for 16th century recipes is the famous *Opera of Bartolomeo Scappi*. As this was originally published in Venice in 1570, when Elisabetta was living in Venice, it is highly likely that she would have had some familiarity with this work. Happily, Terence Scully's (2008) English translation of this work makes it more accessible to me as I know only a little Italian.

When planning what to cook for my spouse, two friends and daughter I started by looking at Scappi's menu for a dinner to get an idea of how the food was structured. His *cena* for 8 April (Scully, pp 392-394) consisted of four courses, two served from the credenza and one final course after the table cloth was removed. Each of those courses contained, respectively, nine, seven, eleven and four dishes. As Baroness Agnes usually comments on how full she is after I have cooked, and I was cooking for a very small group, this felt excessive. I thought that my persona, as a Venetian of good family but small fortune, would be unlikely to serve as much food as a member of the religious elite that Scappi worked for. I therefore decided to downscale my dinner and serve in a more modern course structure to make it more comfortable for my guests.

Course One

To prepare a thick soup of common field mushrooms and other sorts of mushroom.

Get field mushrooms (which are the most delicate of all mushrooms) in their season, in Rome between the end of February and the middle of May. Clean off the skin that is around them, and especially any sand on their stalk, and wash them in several changes of water. Put them in a casserole pot where there is melted pork fat, pepper and cinnamon, and sauté them lightly with nothing else because as they cook they make their own broth. When they have boiled a little, put in some yellow saveloy or slices of marbled prosciutto to cook with them, adding a good little meat broth. Before serving them, put in a handful of herbs, a little grated bread, verjuice, pepper, cinnamon and saffron, and bring it all to a boil. Serve hot with a saveloy on top. (Scappi, II, 215, pp 245-6)

My redaction to serve 4

Ingredients

800gm mushrooms	1 T parsley
2T lardo (you could use bacon depending on availability)	¼ cup breadcrumbs
1t each of pepper and cinnamon	1T verjuice
4 slices of prosciutto	1t each of pepper and cinnamon
6 cups of beef stock	Pinch of saffron

Method:

1. Clean the mushrooms (I got mine from Countdown, not Rome) and thinly slice them.
2. Heat up a cast iron casserole dish or heavy pot on a high heat.
3. When the pot is hot, add in the lardo/bacon fat and melt but do not burn. Turn down heat to medium at this point.
4. Add in the chopped mushrooms with the first lot of pepper and cinnamon.
5. Cook mushrooms on a medium heat until they have built up a good amount of their own broth around them.
6. Finely chop the prosciutto. Add this and the beef stock to the soup. (Be careful here with your salt balance. If you have a salty stock do not add too much prosciutto).
7. Put the lid on the pot and continue to cook at a medium heat until the stock begins to reduce.
8. Take 2 T of the liquid out of the pot and mix with the breadcrumbs and verjuice. Add in the parsley and spices. Mix thoroughly and then add the mixture to the pot. Then thoroughly mix the soup.
9. Leave the soup to thicken and serve hot.
10. I put some slices of prosciutto in the oven to harden and then used them as a garnish on top of the soup.
11. I served it with Manchet bread, the recipe of which is on page 63 of Ruth Beeby's *Sallett Humbles & Shrewsbury Cakes*. Although this is an English recipe it is also from the 16th century.

