



THE AUSTERITY KITCHEN
BY CHRISTINE BAUMGARTNER

Where the alimentary is elementary.



When Calabrians courted in earnest it was a far more staid affair. The union followed a round of approval from the suitor's mother and a committee of uncles and aunts. Then cash changed hands. No credit was accepted.

Potent Ingredients

By CHRISTINE BAUMGARTNER

This post is the first in a series of articles that explore the stories behind history's more peculiar cookbooks.



Taranto : the last palm

The courtship rituals of Southern Italy captivated the writer and notorious sybarite Norman Douglas. Each evening he watched as young Calabrian men would lean against the railing of Corso Vittorio Emanuele, a promenade that skirts the south side of the old town, their backs to the sea and their eyes fixed on the houses across the road. There even younger women would pose in front of windows or on balconies to display their charms. Not a word did either side exchange; the men only stood staring like lovesick dogs, while the women afflicted them.

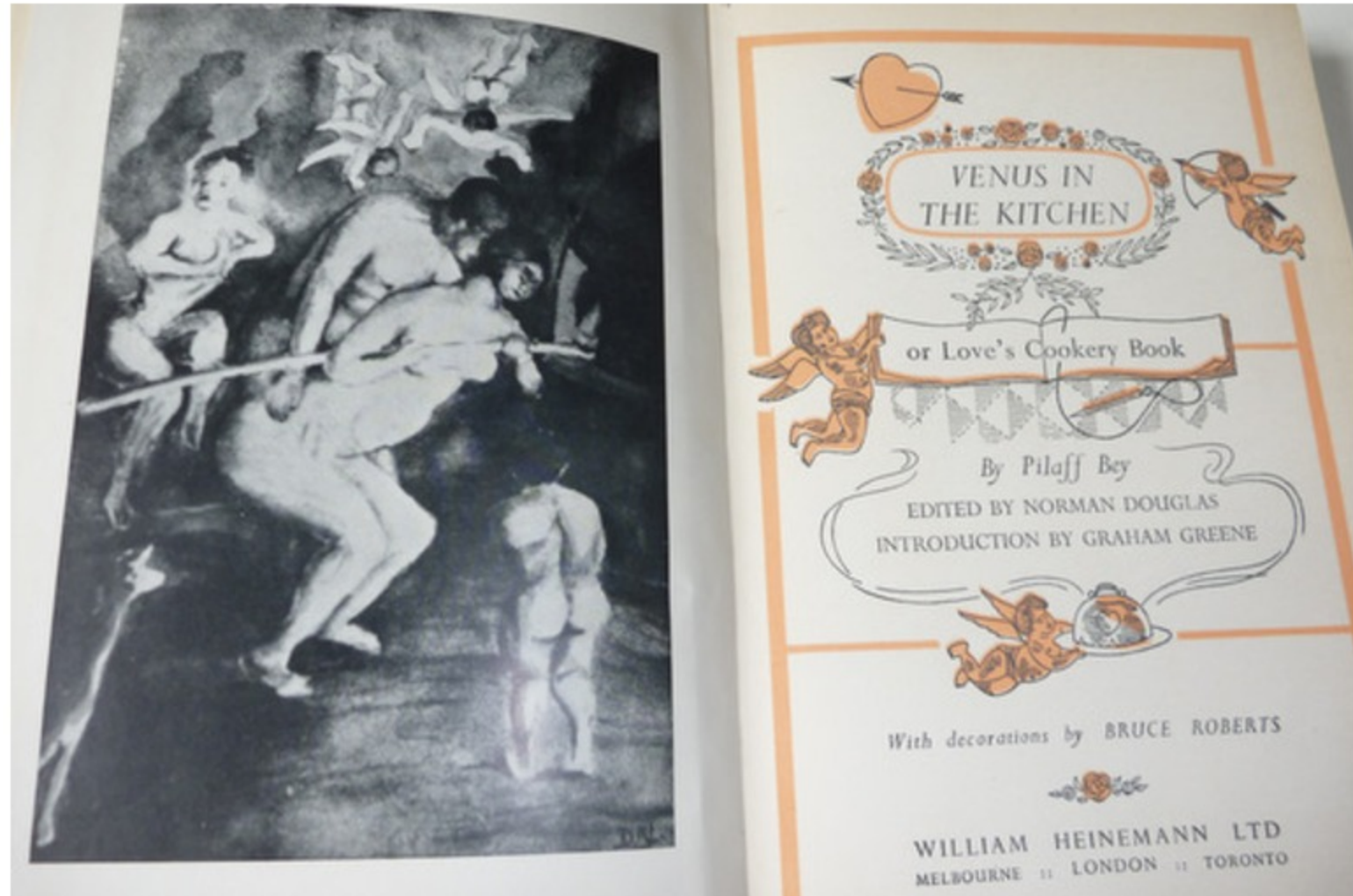
Such vigilance might suggest passionate love. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. What appeared to the casual observer as earnest wooing was nothing more than a love game, a way to pass the time. Sometimes the men, if they felt their vigils went unnoticed, threatened suicide. But even this was staged. They swallowed enough corrosive sublimate to induce a few violent convulsions, nothing more. Once the show had gone on long enough, they sought out a doctor with a stomach pump.



An old Shepherd

"Youth must keep up the poetic tradition of the 'fiery,'" Douglas surmised. Perhaps he had this tradition in mind, and the foods that could sustain such vigils, when he penned his final work, the 1952 cookbook *Venus in the Kitchen*. Containing recipes alternately delectable, prosaic and bizarre, the cookbook grew out of Douglas's personal aphrodisiacal repertoire. In the book's preface, Douglas writes that the recipes were "collected slowly, one by one, for the private use and benefit of a small group of friends." These friends, most of whom, Douglas is sorry to say, are "older than they want to be, and all of them anxious ... to preserve for as long as may be possible the vitality of their youth and middle age," found vigor and rigor return to their loins, thanks to these dishes. It was at the urging of one of them, a gentleman who begged Douglas to have his recipes printed and thus "confer a benefit on some poor devil," that he finally decided to publish them.

Venus in the Kitchen took Douglas twelve years to complete. Other pursuits — collecting Persian carpets and tawny, clean-limbed boys; writing a book on Central Asian melons — frequently impeded the manuscript's progress. But the months before Douglas's death in 1952 found him between six o'clock and dinner-time at a cafe in Capri, surrounded by loose carbon pages, half-finished aperitifs, his snuff box and an old blue beret. The charmingly chaotic scene this presented moved many of Douglas's acquaintances to offer him their help. But Douglas, his fingers cramped with rheumatism and his white hair yellowed with nicotine, insisted on compiling and proofing the book himself. It was the old roué's first project in many years, and it was to be his last.



That's not to say he didn't have any help at all. D.H. Lawrence drew the frontispiece, which made it to press despite Douglas's objections. The author disapproved of Lawrence's design. "For my own part, I must confess that this picture of a fat naked woman pushing a loaf into an oven is not at all my notion of 'Venus in the kitchen.'" Graham Greene proved more helpful, writing the book's introduction, in which he noted that it was fitting "that [Douglas's] last book should be as unserious and shameless as this collection of aphrodisiac recipes, to close a life in which he had enjoyed varied forms of love, left a dozen or so living tokens here and there, and been more loved himself than most men."

Indeed, the recipes are often as shameless as Douglas's exploits. From soups to sweets, Douglas's collection of amatory dishes ranges from the seemingly ordinary (purée of celery) to the bizarre (a stew of sparrow's brains), and derives from sources divers and arcane. A couple could begin their romantic evening with a bowl of "Sturgeon Soup À La Chinoise" (from Queen Victoria's one-time chief cook C.E. Francatelli), and follow it with a slice of "Pie of Bull's Testicles" (taken from Pope Pius V's private cook) accompanied by a dollop of "Marrow of Leopard," before finishing the meal with a glass of gentian wine. As a post-coital nightcap the couple could quaff a restorative "After-Love Drink" (highly recommended, Douglas notes, by his friend Baron de M-) of maraschino, raw egg yolk, cream, and old brandy.



Chapel of Saint Mark

A few years after the book's publication, Douglas died, some say from a deliberate overdose. His life had been fantastically ill-spent, and his last words were no less scandalous: "Get these fucking nuns away from me." But what the writer lacked in virtue, he made up for in good cheer and intelligence. Critic John Sutherland writes that, at one time, Douglas was "regarded as one of the smartest things going" and that part of "that smartness was his keeping, for the whole of his long depraved life, one jump ahead of the law." That he did so without compunction or regret was perhaps his life's most beguiling accomplishment.



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Photographs from Norman Douglas's *Old Calabria* (1915)

"We must revise our conceptions as to the love-passions of these southerners," Douglas writes in *Old Calabria*, his 1915 guide to Southern Italy. "[T]hey have none of our obfuscated sentimentality."

Douglas published *Venus in the Kitchen* under the pseudonym Pilaff Bey.

D.H. Lawrence's reviled illustration

Sparrow's brains were a favorite of Aristotle, as well as the school of Salerno. Only the brains of male sparrows should be used.

Recipe for "Loving Cup" from *Venus in the Kitchen*: "Put in a bowl some toasted bread; add six ounces of sugar, one lump of sugar saturated in orange-flower essence; grate half a nutmeg and mix it with the same quantity of cinnamon and ginger in powder. Put this in the bowl together with a quart of good ale, one bottle of sherry, and a little soda water. The soda water is the least important of these ingredients, and can be dispensed with."

Previously by
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