

# Una Cena Barocca - A Dining Experience of the Baroque Age

By Denis De Lucca

*The cuisine of the Baroque age was varied and imaginative, and many authentic menus and recipes of the period still survive. Table settings and the presentation of food all gained in importance at this time, and a wide range of ingredients were used. Paintings of the period enable us to visualize the sumptuous displays of food that were admired.*

*The International Institute for Baroque Studies held an evening of Baroque food and music on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2014, offering patrons the opportunity to experience the gastronomic tastes and flavours of the Baroque age. The event was held in the Ballroom of the Grand Hotel Excelsior and was organised in collaboration with the Programme for Mediterranean Culinary Culture at the Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture at the University of Malta, the Institute for Tourism Studies, and the Malta Chef Society, and was supported by the Ministry for Tourism. Baroque music was performed by the 'Camera Galatea' – Rebecca Hall (flute), John McDonough (oboe) and Akos Kertez (cello).*

The Baroque age brought about radical changes to the objective rules and balances that had governed artistic expression in the preceding Renaissance period. In line with the changed scenarios of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the cuisine of the Baroque age became an important form of the new subjective artistic expression where impressive spectacles of food presentations and dining scenarios became a daily routine in the palatial homes of Europe's aristocracy.

The settings of aristocratic tables now reached new peaks of sophistication with the use of objects of great value and artistic merit: silver salt shakers, crystal glasses, cutlery encrusted with precious stones, fine chinaware and white tablecloths covered with flowers. In Italy such aristocratic banquets also provided occasions of elegance and refined manners that left a profound impact on European early



modern culture, soon disseminating menus of gastronomical delights as well as guidelines for the interior décor of dining and reception rooms to the two superpowers of the Baroque age, France and Spain.

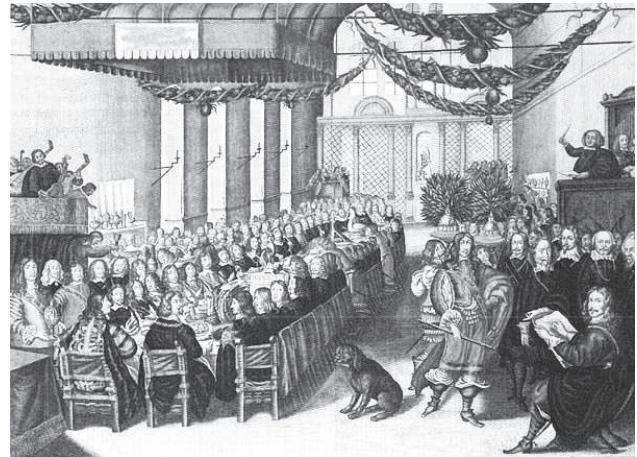
It is therefore not surprising that by 1600, the head chef emerged as the main figure in the palace kitchen where he was expected to prepare a myriad of tastes, intense aromas and new culinary delicacies. Some food items, which came from the newly discovered Americas, were first utilised in the Baroque kitchen: corn was used to make cakes and pies; tomatoes, as yet only used to decorate tables, soon started being used in Naples to flavour sauces while chocolate, sorbets and coffee now became part of the daily dietary habits of the Europe's nobility. All these ingredients were available in Malta during the rule of the Knights of St John.

The efforts of the head chef in the Baroque kitchen were supported by a large number of dining room attendants including the 'scalco' (steward) and the 'trinciante' (meat carver). The head chef oversaw the conception, preparation, service, animation and ceremonial which were indispensable for the success of the





Baroque banquet. This, for example, was the role of Antonio Latini, a renowned Neapolitan *scalco* employed with the Viceroy of Spain, who invented the *Pasticcio alla napoletana* using a multitude of ingredients for this dish: veal, chopped pigeons, sweetbreads, livers, breast slices, sausages, truffles, pine nuts, *sopressata*, mushrooms, ham, *cannolicchi*, sliced *cedronata*, fresh provola, egg yolks and chops, in a tasty broth. In his later life Latini served as the dining room steward of Cardinal Antonio Barberini in Rome, where his banquet tables were full of triumphal culinary arrangements made out of butter and delicious marzipan.



On the other hand, the role of the *trinciante* in the eighteenth-century Baroque banquet was codified in a book by Vincenzo Cervio, who was employed with Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, where '*trinciare in ara*' was considered to be an art which required both physical strength, a knowledge of animal anatomy and extreme precision. Cervio's book even specifies the number of strokes needed to cut large birds. The courtly life of the Baroque age, crystallised to its full expression in the Versailles of *Le Roi Soleil*, Louis XIV of France, required frequent social contacts which necessitated some sort of rules to regulate the interactions between individuals.

Good manners became the way through which social rank was expressed so that the Baroque banquet became a perfect occasion for showing off manners which required a correct posture, a correct distance between individuals and the correct use of tableware. The '*Galateo*' written by Inquisitor Monsignor Giovanni della Casa in 1558 is still considered today as one of the best collection of rules governing good manners at the dawn of the Baroque age.

