

March 30, 2020



Wednesday

Is a Fast Day



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“Take good spices, that is, ginger, cloves, cinnamon, and galingale, and grind them in a mortar; then take a handful of sage and grind well in the same mortar with the spices; then take eggs and hardboil them; remove the yolk and grind with the sage; blend with wine, cider, or malt vinegar; take the egg white and chop finely and add to the sage mixture; put in pig’s trotters or (other) cold meat and then serve.”

“That could be delicious, except Wednesdays are fast days so I don’t think I could use any meat; I’ll just do the sage sauce, and I’ll boil some pasta to go with it. Galingale must be galangal, or *cyperus longus*,” said Bombònica to herself, putting down the cookbook to look in the orange cupboard for the mortar and pestle. When she found them, she went to the pantry and got the glass jars where she kept the spices on a metal shelf her father had purchased years earlier and painted a bright green. Then she grabbed two bottles of *Caballero* wine she’d gotten from Mrs. John earlier on Tuesday morning (when the labels were still intact), and two eggs. As she was grinding the spices and pouring the wine a little poem came to her mind:

*Vins y ot bons et precieus*

*A boire moult delicieus*

*Citouaudez rosez florez*

*Vin de gascoigne coulerez*

*De montpellier et de rochele*

*Et de garnache et de castele*

*Vin de beaune et de saint pourcain*

*Que riche gent tientent pour sain . . .*

“I wonder why they never specify quantities in these recipes,” she thought. “Never have I seen a medieval recipe to clearly state: take two ounces of this, seven grams of that, five pounds of the other thing, and so on.”

The cookbook, a gift from Sister Chiara, was in fact not one, but two Anglo-Norman culinary collections from British Library manuscripts Additional 32085 and Royal 12.C.xii. To this day the story of how the manuscripts traveled from London to our town, or how they got into the local Clarisses’ hands remains an obscure one, and it will take careful and thorough research to set the matter straight. “It appears the British Library people are not yet aware of the manuscripts’ missing. Or, more probably Sister Chiara’s are only later copies of the original ones, and if that’s the case, obviously no one’d have any problems with that,” Bombònica thought.



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At this moment it occurred to her that perhaps, since she was cooking a Norman sauce she'd better use one of the French wines in the poem, but she didn't have any and didn't think any could be gotten from *Friar John's*. Next time she'd try the Old Town wine shop, *Le Roman de Fauvel*, but for this particular sauce on this particular day it was obviously too late. The recipes she liked, except the lack of specification regarding quantities was really annoying, and at some point she'd expressed her disappointment *viva voce*.



“Oh,” Sister Chiara had said “first of all, don't look a gift horse in the mouth. Second, just play it by ear: add a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and, of course, salt and sugar to taste when necessary. I believe spices are like accidentals in music: you have to carefully adjust the taste of your food, just like you adjust the sound of your music, so in the end it's not too corrosive yet not too bland.”

“Oh, it is then just like St. Bernard used to say: *Semitonium ... est dulcedo et condimentum totius cantus, et sine ipso cantus esset corrosus, transformatus et dilaceratus*. The semitone ... is the sweetness and condiment of all song, and without it the song would be harsh, changed, and dismembered.”

“Something like that,” had replied Sister Chiara, smiling and showing her dimples. “Anyway, grinding those spices is of prime importance, especially if you're cooking some sauce or bread-thickened soup. Just the other day I was reading in *Le Menagier de Paris*: ‘in all sauces and thick pottages for which spices and bread are ground, one must first grind the spices, and use a mortar. For the bread that is ground afterwards requires the [flavor] left over from spices ...’.

“And this *Menagier*, what is it exactly?”

“Oh, it's a book composed by a Paris *bourgeois* around 1394, incorporating a formidable body of instructions for his young bride on how to run a household. He even noted how much the *épiciers* of that city charged for the most frequently used spices: almonds; powdered ‘colombin’ ginger (which was imported from Quilon on the Malabar Coast); ground cinnamon; ‘mesche’ ginger (imported from Mecca); long pepper; galingale; mace; green laurel leaves; and saffron. I once even made a little poem about them (I must admit, the meter is faulty at times—that's especially true of lines 5 through 8, but perhaps when the poem is set to music it'll turn out all right: Sister Imelda is a skilled musician and she'll fix it). But the poem goes like this:

*Pound, crush, grind those spices*

*Flavor subtly all your sauces:*

*Pepper, sugar, ginger, cinnamon,*

*Spikenard, aniseed, clove, and saffron.*

*Galangal and rice*



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*Do taste very nice.*

*Nutmeg and mace*

*Lend a lot of grace.*

*Ginger mixed with zedoary:*

*Fraudulent apothecary! . . .”*

Here Sister Chiara had paused for a second to say:

“I would never do that.”

Then she went on:

*Grains of Paradise are divine*



*Use them in  
your table*

*wine:*

*Grind your pepper very fine,*

*Take some cinnamon and combine,*

*Sprinkle gently with  
your fingers*

*To ensure the pleasure lingers.”*

“Oh well,” she’d said, I’m really not the world’s greatest poet, but I do enjoy a nice glass of warm wine seasoned with a little cinnamon and pepper. That’s especially true of long, cold winter nights like the ones we’ve been blessed with here.”

Bombònica took a break from grinding, mixing, blending, and chopping, and sipped a little wine straight from the *Caballero Fino Pavon* bottle. It wasn’t a ladylike thing to do: she knew it’d be more elegant (and also more aesthetically in line with the shoes she was wearing) to sip it from a crystal wine glass (preferably Bohemian crystal), but she was confident of being able to judge the proper quantity to be ingested even without that.







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“Except when I drink from a bottle I need to wear more plebeian shoes,” she averred.

From the other bottle she had brought in from the pantry Padre José María Lerchundi, OFM was watching her closely, a somewhat disapproving expression on his usually serene, friendly face. His silver beard shone resplendently in the morning light; his deep brown eyes offered a pleasant contrast to the whiteness of his hair; his general manner was dignified, yet not cold but benevolent, as expected from a person of great accomplishments and grace. Padre Lerchundi was close friends with the Clarisses (or Minoreesses) on Red Creek Street, and he especially enjoyed the company of Sister Imelda, for they were both from Spain and both excellent musicians.



“Did I do something wrong?” asked Bombònica.

“Well,” the Padre responded in his deep baritone voice with a slight Moroccan accent “I honestly think you should have chosen my bottle over the other one. This wine comes from Moscatel grapes grown in Chipiona, and in my judgement it simply goes better with all those spices you’ve been grinding, on account of its floral and citric aromas; it’s a wine that’s in itself reminiscent of dried fruits and spices, so it would agree splendidly with the ginger, cloves, and cinnamon in your sauce. But of course you’re free to do as you please.”

Padre Lerchundi’s accent came from the long years he had spent in Tangier as an Apostolic Prefect. Of saintly reputation, he was also an accomplished arabist and the author of *Rudiments of the Arabic-Vulgar of Morocco: With Numerous Exercises, and Examples of Its Theory and Practice*, published in 1900, now a rare a precious book of which the Sisters owned a signed copy, the author’s gift.

“Thank you, Padre. I’ll keep that in mind for my next sauce—and please pardon my ignorance,” said Bombònica. “I hope I didn’t offend you.”

She had a little more *Caballero Fino Pavon* from the other bottle. The wine was somewhat sweet, yet sharp and fresh, and had almond and yellow apple notes; she wasn’t displeased with the flavor.

“Oh, no,” said Padre Lerchundi. “You had no way of knowing. But let me disclose yet another little gastronomic secret: you shouldn’t waste this venerable and refined sauce on something as vulgar as pasta; that—just like polenta—is peasant food, if I may be so bold. Really, my dear, a concoction so divine should fare much better: it should keep company with some royally cooked venison, or roosters and jellied birds, swans, peacocks, partridges, pheasants, or herons; and you should definitely reserve it for a meat day.”

A dreamy look came into his eyes. He took a deep yet controlled breath, as if delicately sniffing subtle aromas unknown to us plebeians, passed his invisible hands through his beard and moustache, and continued:

“Spices are costly things for they come from distant lands at great sacrifices, so one should treat them with respect. I once read a fourteenth-century Arabic description of the coast of Ceylon ‘covered with trunks of the cinnamon tree;’ Marco Polo, Jordan de Severa, and Juan de Hese referred to cinnamon as one of the chief productions of Malabar; and mid-fourteenth-century



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writer Marino Sanuto described spices as ‘articles of moderate weight and great price or value—as cubebs, cloves, nutmeg, mace’ and some others, or ‘of greater weight and lesser price—as pepper, ginger, frankincense, canella, and the like.’ At any rate, their cost used to be prohibitive, and they’re not much cheaper nowadays; also, from what I’m told, they’re relatively hard to find even as I speak. I wonder under what circumstances were you able to purchase yours?”

“Oh, no big deal, really. I got them at the grocery store on Red Creek Street. You know, the one by the main entrance to the Municipal Park, right across the street from *Chez les Poor Claires*. They didn’t cost an arm and a leg, either.”

“Well then, if that is so, then perhaps I’ve been spending too many years as a drawn figure on a bottle label; I may be out of touch with the current state of affairs with regard to spices, and perhaps with regard to other things as well.”

“That may be so, Padre, but as far as I am concerned you’re still a great and noble man, and the most illustrious food connoisseur I’ve ever met.” She sipped some more wine from the other bottle: “The more of it I have, the better it tastes,” she thought.

“By the way,” Padre Lerchundi continued “this bears no relation to our conversation about spices, but let me say that rumor has it Mrs.’s Bonaventure’s griffin stole and swallowed your shower handle O ring. I heard that through the grapevine—oh, pardon me, I wanted to say from my former companions, the *Caballero* wine bottles at *Friar John*’s. You know, we used to share the same shelf, and gossip travels fast, far, and wide; in more elegant terms I could say information is shared through academic osmosis. We used to be so closely packed together, there was no way one couldn’t hear what the next two bottles on both sides said when they talked to each other.”

Bombònica crossed her legs, straightened her back, and looked him hard in the eyes.

“You don’t say.”

“I do say,” said the Padre.

“Then perhaps you’ve heard of a solution to this enigma?”

“It is most unfortunate that I haven’t. None of my companions could come up with an answer, although the question was debated on Monday night, all night long—of course, once all customers as well as Mr. and Mrs. John were gone. You know, we used to get down from the shelves, sit ourselves at the garden tables, play cards, and talk. Obviously we did that on Monday night, too.”

“Playing cards? What do you mean?”

“Well you know the playing cards sets the Artist of the Sundial designed a while ago: I am talking about those; we even used them sometimes for divination purposes. That’s how, for instance, we were able to predict Mrs. Bacon’s chimaera would be visited by Mrs. Grosseteste’s billy-goat on such and such night at moon rise. Or that Friar William Ockham’s razors in his Old Town shop were in dire need of being sharpened, for through applying too strictly the principle of parsimony he had concluded sharpening them was unnecessary; as a result, all the razors were about to go blunt simultaneously (I personally think that was a form of organized



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protest, but that's just my humble opinion), and that wouldn't please his customers. Things like that."

"Yeah," said Bombònica pensively "I suppose razors should be kept sharp at all times, otherwise why even bother to have them? I mean, blunt razors would defy the purpose, right?"

"Quite so. Anyway, I was already gone from *Friar John's* at the time of Mr. MacRobius's death, but some of my old bottle companions found the means to send me word about that, too."

"Pardon me, but I don't see how they could possibly do that."

"Oh, it's very simple, really: you see, they had already allowed Mr. van Tcheluk to detach their labels and cut out the 'O's, which subsequently he turned into curls of smoke; one of these sort of lingered about and picked up information from the party assembled at *Friar John's* yesterday morning; by way of a gentle breeze it reached your pantry window in the afternoon and relayed the message. Right, *companero*?" he asked the bottle from which Bombònica was now taking another mouthful. Then she poured some more wine into the herb and egg yolk concoction, and started mixing vigorously using the pestle.

The *Fino Pavon* bottle gave off a series of gurgling sounds and inebriating aromas. It waited till Bombònica put it back down on the kitchen table, then answered:

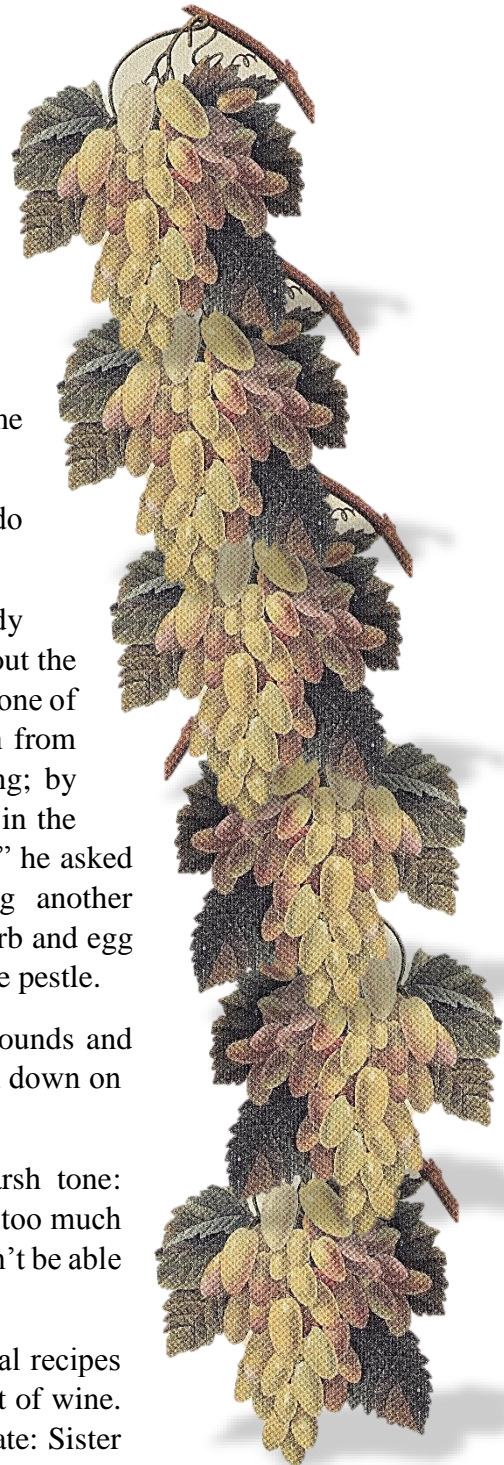
"Right." Then, turning to her, it said in a rather harsh tone: "Careful or you'll ruin your sauce: you've already used too much of me, and it's going to cause a flavor unbalance you won't be able to fix."

"Oh I always said it was disgraceful how these medieval recipes never specify quantities—not of spices, not of meat, not of wine. One never knows how much of this or that to incorporate: Sister Chiara was right, I have to play it by ear."

"More like 'by mouth'," discreetly crooned the *Fino*. Then it burbled more audibly: "I once heard from a Frenchie—it was a costly *St. Pourçain*—that an ancestor of it had been a party to one of that debauched horse Fauvel's banquets; this happened around 1310 or 1314, I think, so it's been a while ..."

"It was during the times of the so-called 'Babylonian captivity,' when the popes resided at Avignon," cut in Padre Lerchundi.

"Everyone knows that," replayed the *Fino*. "The story is recorded in *Le Roman de Fauvel* ..."







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“Of which the 1316-1318 edition by mesire Chaillou de Pesstain is kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris,” interrupted the Padre.

“Let me finish,” replied the *Fino*. “It’s written in a manuscript known as *fr. 146* (that’s *français* for those of us who don’t know). Anyway, they didn’t drink any of the old *St. Pourçain* on that occasion—and that’s how the wine survived to tell the story—but venison and fish were served in abundance with spiced sauces ...”

“I read about it,” cut in Padre Lerchundi. “They had something called *vertjus*, which is an uncooked sauce made from green grapes (or any other acid fruit) and salt; there is a recipe of *verjus* (which I assume is the same thing, spelled differently) made from sorrel, too, in *Le Ménagier de Paris*.”

“Yes,” agreed the *Fino*. “At least two different recipes were used for *saulce vert*: one, for fish, was made with parsley or rosemary; the other involved several ground spices and herbs, such as ginger, cloves, and marjoram. This pal of mine, the *St. Pourçain* I personally knew also talked about another spiced sauce, *cameline*, very popular in France and England ...”

“Which is made with *poudre cameline* (*cameline* powder) comprised of ginger, cinnamon, saffron and almonds ground in a mortar, soaked in wine, then mixed with ground bread, boiled in water; you’re supposed to sprinkle some sugar on top of it,” intervened the Padre.

“Will you please let me talk?” said the *Fino*. “I meant to say this for a long time, but I always hesitated—what with you being a Padre, a man of letters, a renowned arabist and all that—I thought I would keep my mouth shut. But you’re being really annoying with this marked inclination of yours to interfere and finish another bottle’s sentence. It bothers me no end; in fact, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say I find it offending to the marrow in my cork, and it was about time I told you.”

“Gentlemen,” said Bombònica “please don’t quarrel; not in my kitchen. I thought you were a couple of classy wines of refined taste and polished manners; it isn’t fitting, given your illustrious ancestry and solid sauce expertise for you to behave like two plebeian beer cans on a bodega table that only understand hot dogs and French fries.”

“You’re right. Please accept my apologies,” said Padre Lerchundi. “It’s the wine talking in both of us ...”







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“Nevertheless, Padre, may I remind you the saying we had in the old country: ‘*In vino ...*’” interposed the *Fino*.

“*Veritas*,” interrupted the Padre.

“Gentlemen, please, not again,” said Bombònica. “These two are incorrigible,” she murmured to herself. “There’s so much babbling in here, I can’t even concentrate on finishing my sauce.”

A look of embarrassment came into Padre Lerchundi’s face:

“Miss Bombònica, do pardon our lack of manners: truth is, I suspect we are both a little inebriated—it’s the spirit of wine that makes us slightly giddy and perhaps even querulous to an extent we ourselves don’t like to admit. It isn’t easy to be a wine one hundred percent of the time.”

“Anyway,” interrupted the *Fino* “the curl of smoke that brought us the news of Mr. MacRobius’s death also said our companions at *Friar John’s* were advancing a very interesting hypothesis with regard to the event in question...”

“Which was that the man might have been killed by a concoction administered by Mrs. Bacon ...” cut in Padre Lerchundi.

“In the name of Dionysius, let me talk!” shouted the *Fino* and went on: “It is rumored among wine bottles at *Friar John’s* that she was mad with jealousy, and prepared a drink made from laurel leaves—which you may know are believed to be poisonous ...”

“Even lethal sometimes,” said the Padre.

The *Fino* rolled its cork (for it did not have any eyes to roll) and continued:

“... which she subsequently offered to Mr. MacRobius to falsely signal she wasn’t upset with him for abandoning her for that actress.”

At that moment sparks flew in through the open kitchen window; they were accompanied by Mrs. Bonaventure’s anguished voice:

“Bombònica! Bombònica! Are you there? I wanted you to know that the police have just arrested Mrs. Bacon: she’s under suspicion of murdering Mr. MacRobius! My griffin is very upset, it started spitting fire again!”

“I told you so,” said Padre Lerchundi, traces of a knowledgeable smile showing in his eyes, as the remaining areas of his face stayed hidden behind the bushy moustache and the ample beard.

“*In vino veritas*,” concluded the *Fino*, popping its cork.

And so it came to be that Bombònica never got a chance to finish her sage sauce on Wednesday.





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For the sage sauce, see MS London, British Library, Add. 32085, ff. 117v-119v, “How One Should Make Food and Spiced Wine,” no. 3: “Saugee;” in C. B. Heatt and R. F. Jones, “Two Anglo-Norman culinary collections edited from British Library manuscripts Additional 32085 and Royal 12.C.xii,” *Speculum* lxi (1986), pp. 859- 82, at p. 863 (for the Anglo-Norman text) and p. 874 (for the modern English translation). The authors date the first manuscript in the late thirteenth century; the second belongs in the first four decades of the fourteenth century. They were both redacted in Anglo-Norman and thus printed in the article in question; a modern English translation is provided on pp. 873-9.

For table wines, see *Le premier et le secont livre de fauvel in the Version Preserved in B. N. f. fr. 146*, ed. Paul Helmer (Ottawa: The Institute of Medieval Music, 1997), 282-3: “There were wines, good and costly//Very delicious to drink//[Spiced up with] zedoary, rosé wine, blue//Colored wine from Gascony//Wine from Montpellier and La Rochelle//And from Garnache and Castille//Wine from Beaune and St. Pourçain//That is considered healthy by the rich.” My translation.

For St. Bernard and the semitone, see the theoretical corpus known as *Ars nova*, in *Philippi de Vitriaco Ars nova*, ed. Gilbert Reaney, André Gilles, and Jean Maillard, *Corpus scriptorum de musica* 8 ([Rome]: American Institute of Musicology, 1964), 21. My translation.

For pounding spices, see *Le Menagier de Paris*, ed. Georgine E. Brereton and Janet M. Ferrier, with a foreword by Beryl Smalley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 172: “*Primo* que en toutes saulses et potages lyans en quoy on broye espices et pain, l’en doit premierement broyer les espices et oster du mortier. Car le pain que l’en broye après requeut ce qui des espices est demouré; ainsi on ne pert rien, ce que on perdrait qui feroit autrement.” My translation *supra*.

For cinnamon varieties, their geographic distribution, as well as their growth, harvesting, transportation, and commercial uses, see W. Desborough Cooley, “On the Regio Cinnamomifera of the Ancients,” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 19 (1849) : 166-91.

For *vertjus* and *sauce cameline*, see *Le Menagier de Paris*, ed. Brereton and Ferrier, 258-9.

Illustrations:

For apothecary’s shop, see *Herbarius zu Teutsch (Hortus sanitatis; Augsburg, 1496)*, fol. Aiii verso. London: Wellcome Library for the History of Medicine.

For harvesting pepper grains, see Ambroise Paré, *Les Oeuvres d'Ambroise Paré ... avec les figures et portraits, tant de l'anatomie que des instruments de chirurgie, et de plusieurs monstres* (Paris, 1579). London : Wellcome Library for the History of Medicine.

Fruit color drawings attributed to Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759-1840).