

READINGMED: MEDIEVAL CUISINE, A BREW OF FOOD AND HISTORY

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In the Middle Ages, the Mediterranean was a divided sea, at least from a culinary point of view: in the north, people ate mainly meat, absent from kitchens in the south, while people in the east preferred cheese, fish and cereals.

But those territories never remained separated.

Trade, pilgrimages and wars encouraged exchanges and mergers, whose evidence is still visible today in the cuisine: food and recipes which are repeated with different names on the tables from one side to the other of the common sea, thus confirming how close the two coasts have always been.

The book **“Eating Medieval Food. Food and Medieval cuisine, among history, recipes and curious facts” (published by Penne & Papiri), by Rosella Omicciolo Valentini**, also dives into the Mediterranean culinary traditions during the Middle Ages.

The book outlines the evolutionary scenario of nutrition during the Middle Ages in the various cultures of the known world, with a particular attention on the Mediterranean regions, and is enriched by many recipes from the different geographical and cultural latitudes of the period. *«In each age the food is part of the daily culture of a people. In the Middle Ages, the nutrition and the banquets fully reflect the society at the time, revealing also the complexity of the different territorial areas and the social exchanges which were following the trade»*, the author explains, specifying that the book acknowledges *«the important role of the so-called Arab culture, that is of those Muslim populations which not only lived in North Africa, but that, through the conquests of the Holy War, arrived in Spain and southern Italy and influenced strongly the habits and cuisine»*. The book thus reveals that, while in the north of the basin nutrition was dominated by the influence of Barbaric populations, and was therefore heavily based on the use of meat (mainly pork), in the southern regions it stood out for the absolute lack of meat. *«The great religions of the time defined and separated the territorial areas»*, the author explains, specifying that the growing of grape-vine and olives was extended to the “*respublica christiana*”, while in the lands conquered by the Arabs, grapevine was uprooted in favour of other products, such as citrus fruit. Instead, in the eastern part of the basin, in the lands of the Byzantines, the classical culture remained, focused on the use of cereals, cheese and fish. *«A meaningful example of these territorial features can be found today in the sweets of the Sicilian cuisine, which originated from the Arab period when sugar started to spread: sorbet and granita, marzipan and pasta reale, but above all the well-known cassata, whose name comes from the Arabic “quas’at”»*, the author explains and specifies: *«We must not think, however, that the different territories remained completely separated and divided, because trade, pilgrimages and also the wars of the Middle Ages promoted cultural exchanges, which even the cuisine handed down to us»*.

Thus, in the Italian recipe books of the XIV and XV centuries, we can often find recipes which can be deemed as “international”. Even dry pasta, nowadays considered as typically Italian, is a Medieval product brought in by the Islamic populations and introduced in Sicily around 1000 with the name of “itria”, from the Arabic “itriyah” (food in the form of threads): in North Africa, the nomadic populations of the desert used a lot this dry pasta, of which a memory remains today in the Middle Eastern “rista”, in the “fidiaux” of Provence, in Calabriàs “fileda”, in Genoàs “trenette”. *«Another aspect which marks this Medieval culinary culture are the ordinary recipes, which with little variations, are found in the cooking books of different cultures»*, she continues, recalling the examples of Biancomangiare, Scapece, or Civiero. In the end, the author concludes, *«the common sea of the Romans, even through among wars and religious fights, in the Middle Ages never became an element which divided cultures, but confirmed its nature of medium, continuity, exchange among the populations»*.