

SAINTS AND GASTRONOMY / 3

Saint Aloysius Gonzaga and Mantuan cuisine

CULTURE

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Castiglione delle Stiviere, 2 November 1585. We are in the private chapel of the Gonzaga family castle. A frail young man, elegantly dressed, is kneeling in front of the Blessed Sacrament, his eyes closed and his hands clasped under his pointed chin. The ray of light coming through a stained glass window suggests a sunny day, despite the late autumn. A man enters through a side door and stops to look at the young man: it is his

father, Ferdinand I Gonzaga (1544-1586), lord and then marquis of Castiglione. Ferdinand felt his heart tense at the sight, and his incomprehension at his son's choice increased his confusion. Aloysius, his beloved son, the eldest, endowed with an uncommon intelligence, the one who was to carry on the Gonzaga name, fortune and arms, had given up everything to become a priest. He had chosen God.

It is not that he does not believe in God, but the idea of Heaven, Paradise, the Saints and so on, this entailed seemed abstract to him and far removed from the fascination of earthly life. Instead, Aloysius, already at the age of 10, chose chastity for life and then communicated it to his father with a simplicity that left him stunned. He had dreamed of a grandiose marriage for his son, including a political alliance that would have made their family even stronger.

Now Aloysius is 17 and preparing to go to Rome, where he will realise his dream: he will enter the seminary and later take his vows. On the morning of that same day, in front of the family notary, Aloysius had solemnly renounced his title, all his possessions and his hereditary rights to the marquisates of Mantua and Castiglione in favour of his younger brother Rodolfo (future Rodolfo II da Castiglione, 1569-1593). When Ferdinand had said "Aloysius Gonzaga, Marquis of Castiglione", Aloysius had looked at him with his soul-probing eyes and a serene smile had lit up his face as he replied: "Now I have everything".

Ferdinand watches him, while Aloysius, unaware of his father's presence, continues to pray, in total communion with that God whom Ferdinand would like to hate and whom he mentally blames for all his ills. And perhaps his wife (Marta Tana di Santena, 1550-1605), who took their son to church with her from an early age, is also partly to blame. There were always priests, bishops and cardinals at their table and Aloysius took obvious pleasure in their company, enjoying their conversation. On 22nd July 1580, he had received First Communion from Charles Borromeo, whom the young man admired beyond measure.

After reading a book about Jesuit missionaries in India, Aloysius felt the desire to become a missionary. He had also started "practising", teaching catechism to the boys of Castiglione during the summer. Several times he had visited the houses of the Capuchin friars and of the Barnabites in Casale Monferrato, capital of the Duchy of Monferrato, ruled by the Gonzagas, where the family spent the winter. He had adopted an ascetic lifestyle. And he, the father, had not seen the danger.

He watches his son and wonders what his boy could have found in that invisible and distant world, perhaps non-existent, to give up what he had. What was rightfully his. He

had always been different from the others, he could not deny that. He had sent him to the most brilliant and sophisticated courts in Europe, trying to give him a taste for pomp and circumstance, but had achieved the opposite result.

Court life, with its luxury, intrigue and moral laxity, had left Aloysius deeply dissatisfied. He had imposed acts of penance on himself to defend himself from the indolent customs of the Spanish court and the temptations of the Tuscan court. He wanted a more evangelical, simpler and more austere lifestyle, focused on the spiritual values to which he aspired and which gave meaning to his young life. Revolted by the superficiality and dubious customs of those realities, Aloysius had become increasingly withdrawn, longing for a life dedicated to God. His desire to serve the Church had grown until he made the supreme decision to embrace the priesthood.

And so on that late autumn day he left for Rome, where, shortly afterwards, through the Count of Olivares, Spanish ambassador to the Holy See, he was presented to Pope Sixtus V, who gave him his blessing on 23 November 1585. Two days later he entered the novitiate at Sant'Andrea al Quirinale. Apart from a few interruptions for health or family reasons, Aloysius Gonzaga spent six years in Rome. He took his first vows on 25 November 1587, at the age of 19, and then began his university studies at the Collegio Romano. Over the years, like every other Jesuit student, he worked as a lector and acolyte. The time not occupied by study was spent in prayer and charity.

In 1591, when a plague epidemic broke out in Rome, the Jesuits put themselves at the service of the sick. A witness remembers seeing Aloysius Gonzaga carrying a plague patient on his shoulders to the hospital. Naturally, he was contaminated and became seriously ill. Soon it became apparent that he would die before long, and he was given Extreme Unction. While ill, he spoke several times with his confessor, Cardinal (and later saint) Robert Bellarmine. Aloysius had another vision and told several people that he would die on the octave of the feast of Corpus Christi. On that day, 21 June 1591, he seemed better in the morning, but insisted that he would die before the end of the day.

At the end of the day, Bellarmine recited prayers for the dying. He died shortly before midnight. Father Joseph Tylenda S.J. (1928-2018) says: "When the two Jesuits came to his side, they noticed a change in his face and realised that their young Aloysius was dying. His eyes were fixed on the crucifix he held in his hands, and as he tried to pronounce the name of Jesus, he died."

Purity was his most remarkable virtue. The Carmelite mystic St Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi claimed to have had a vision of him on 4 April 1600. She described him as radiant



with glory for his "interior works, a hidden martyr for his great love of God". He died of the plague on 21 June 1591, at only twenty-three years of age (he was born on 9 March 1568). He was beatified only fourteen years after his death by Paul V, on 19 October 1605. On 31 December 1726 he was canonised together with another Jesuit novice, Stanislaus Kostka, by Benedict XIII.

In a couple of days, on 21st June, it will be his feast day. We will pray for this pure soul, who chose the beauty of faith and renounced the earthly riches and power of his family. Let us not forget that the Gonzagas were an illustrious family, which ruled in particular over the marquisate (later to become the duchy) of Mantua.

Mantua is also a city with an extraordinary gastronomic tradition, much of it dating back to the Gonzagas, who, like other Italian Renaissance lords, also left their mark on the history of food. Due to the geographical position of the province of Mantua, the Mantuan culinary tradition is related to the Emilian cuisine of cured meats and of pasta and the Lombard cuisine of rice. The Mantuan salami (which can be prepared with or without garlic) is famous, as are *coppa*, *pancetta*, *ciccioli* and *culatello*. The typical dishes are exquisite: *chisœla* (savoury flat bread), *tiròt* (flat bread with onions), pumpkin *tortelli*, *capunsei* (tapered cylindrical bread gnocchi). Risottos include: *risotto with puntèl* (topped with salami, pork ribs or chops), *risotto with frogs* (topped with cleaned frogs, oil and onion), *risotto with saltarèi* (topped with fried crayfish), *risotto alla pilota* (topped with pork salami).

A dish that deserves a comment is *bevr'in vin* (from the Mantuan dialect *bevr'in ven*, i.e. drinking in wine): this is a soup that is the typical aperitif and starter of Mantuan cuisine. According to the Gonzaga country tradition, winter meals must be preceded by *bevr'in vin*, always served in a pre-heated bowl and prepared in three different ways, depending on the following main course. If the first course consists of *agnolini* or *cappelletti*, in broth or dry, the *bevr'in vin* is made up of a ladle of boiling broth containing some *agnoli* or *cappelletti*. The temperature is lowered by the diner adding full-bodied red wine to taste. This operation is also known as "*negàr i caplèt in d'l'acqua scura*", or "drowning the *cappelletti* in dark water". In restaurants, in order to make the menus easier for tourists to understand, this version of *bevr'in vin* is often called *sorbir d'agnoli*. If the first course is *pumpkin tortelli*, the *bevr'in vin* is made up of five or six freshly cooked *tortelli*, to which a drop of cooking water and half a glass of wine are added. This version of *bevr'in vin* is also known as *turtèi sguasaròcc*, or "sloshing *tortelli*", underlining the strangeness of pumpkin *tortelli* in soup, as they are usually served dry. For all other first courses, *bevr'in vin* is simply prepared with meat broth and half a glass of wine. The

variants to these three versions consist exclusively of the different types and quantities of wine used, usually Lambrusco, Ancellotta, Clinto or Merlot, and the (optional) addition of grated parmesan cheese.

It is an old popular belief that this type of aperitif-appetizer is a kind of elixir for a long life and, in this regard, a very old proverb from Mantua, still very much in use today, states: "*Al bevr'in vin l'è la salut ad l'omm*", i.e. "drinking in wine is the health of man".

Finally, the desserts are varied: *bignolata* is a cake made with zabaglione cream puffs, chocolate and cream; *fiamòn* (a cake that has now fallen into disuse, made with leftover fried polenta and sprinkled with sugar); *sugolo* or *sugol* is a kind of pudding of very ancient origin which is prepared during the grape harvest period using crushed must bound with flour; *papasìn* (sometimes Italianized as *papassini*) is a sweet made with sultanas, pine nuts, chestnut flour and sugar; finally, *dulcis in fundo*, let's remember the *anello di san Luigi Gonzaga* (Ring of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga), an exquisite almond cake in the shape of a crown (reminiscent of the lace ruff worn by the men of his century) traditionally prepared on 21 June (see recipe).

It will be another way to remember this unusual saint, who preferred the eternal to the ephemeral.