

# **On the Delectable Foods of the World and the Joy of Eating Them: The Culinary Voyage of one Laurentius, Son of Manfredus Tarragonis, Swordsman Extraordinaire. Liber Primus.**

## **Primum Obsonium: Basilisk Egg Fried Rice**

**When dreams be endless, shalt thy path be boundless.  
Bravery, not fear, shalt set thy way ablaze!**

*Sir Scaetha the Dauntless, XII. Knight-Captain of the order of the Heron's Wing*

It is with the heaviest of hearts—yet holding onto the loftiest of ideals—that I leave behind not only the ancestral home of my esteemed family, but also the great kingdom which it has stood guard to since time immemorial. Never once, spending the days of my youth wandering through the shadows casted by the imposing manor of the Tarragonis, skipping and frolicking through the well-tended garden while brandishing a stick as a pretend sword under the watchful gaze of the statues depicting my most honourable lineage, have I entertained the notion that I would one day abscond like a thief in the gloaming hours of the foredawn. Alas, yesternight's altercation with my honourable father Manfredus and my fair younger sister Lavinia—not the first of its kind, and most assuredly not the last—has finally steeled my will in pursuing what in my heart of hearts I have always known to be my destiny. Henceforth, I shall cast away the moniker of Sword-Heir of the Tarragonis, so graciously bequeathed to me by my father on the day of my birth, nigh twenty-one winters ago, and simply be known as Laurentius.

Both to temper my resolve and to substantiate what this treatise of mine has arrogated as its aim, I shall now describe to you, most honourable reader, what is the mission of this lonely wanderer: to travel the world, both known and unknown, with a thirst and a hunger for new discoveries; I hope you, not unlike a patient and wise preceptor with a well-meaning stripling, will pardon my still unripe

witticism when I assure that this is meant in its most literal sense. For the matter of this leather-bound tome you have elected as worthy of your attention is that which both elevates us compared to the mindless beasts and without which life is all but impossible: cuisine. In the cook's ability of taking the most basic of ingredients and crafting new ephemerally beautiful experiences for all the senses I personally see the culmination of the ingenuity of not only the humankind, but also that of all intelligent humanoids; try as I might, however, I was unable to dispel my father's and my sister's misguided notion of food as mere 'fodder to promote muscular growth' and have thusly elected for this voluntary exile from the fair kingdom of Hawrnydell, with the hope of making them see the error of their ways with a chronicle of all the exotic ingredients and unimaginable dishes I shall encounter on this journey.

Originally, I had intended to head north towards the neighbouring kingdom of Illistrio, for I had many friends in the capital who both shared my ideals and would be so kind as to provide me adequate shelter and resources without much notice, and whose genteel upbringing and fine predispositions would prove to be a marvellous distraction on this first leg of my journey—it is also by no means an accident that Illistrion cuisine is famous the world over for its scrumptious hors d'œuvre, as my intention was to format this first liber as a full-course meal. However, as the moment of my daring escape from the estate was nearing with a forceful gait, I was momentarily struck by an epiphany and a suspicion started to make its way through my mind, much as like a greedy little caterpillar bores through a juicy apple. In a ploy to avoid my father's piercing gaze, and also to give my blood the chance to stop boiling, I had taken my leave from him with the excuse of wanting to spend the hour of complin alone in the chapel, which was conveniently located right next to the servants' quarters; there, when our house's majordomo finally had removed himself to his own chambers, I snuck my way in the room of Kahltron, an elderly half-elf who has been faithfully serving my family for as long as I remember and whose love for me I held as surer as the earth on which I walk, and enlisted his help to plot my flight for the subsequent night. However, I came to think, could I really trust a person who had my well-being so dear to his heart to

leave me alone to fend in this dire world? Or would he rather play along with my clever little scheme, informing my father when out of my earshot, so that I could be safely brought home after a little stroll, much like a wayward kitten? Would my quest fail before it had even begun not due to malign intent or mistrust, but rather due to love? That fateful night, to either confirm or dispel my suspicions, instead of absconding through the kitchen door which Kahltron had left unlocked for me, I sneakily lowered myself with a rope of knotted bed sheets through the eastern window of my room, letting myself fall the last couple of metres, rolling to avoid any noise. In an ironic twist, without the military drills which my father had forced upon me to, in his words, "ensure that, in the unlikely event that you have been captured and find yourself unable to take your own life, you are able to evade your captors", I do not believe I would have been able to perform such a task. And lo and behold, my suspicions proved to be true, for I saw two of my father's lackeys hiding in a bush overlooking the path Kahltron had suggested I take, with a couple of saddled horses by their side. Even if I managed to lose those two, the northern route had become all but unusable, I told to myself: it would not be hard in the slightest for my father's men to 'waylay' me on the border with Illistrio or at the house of any of my friends, for all of them were known to him; realising full well that if I returned to my room, not only would I lose this single chance I still had to make my getaway, but I would also prove the weakness of my belief, foremostly to myself, I thusly decided to veer towards the right-hand side of the mansion. The vegetation there, mostly comprised of fruit-bearing shrubbery and officinal plants which my father so callously regarded as mere 'health supplements', was a bit sparse when compared to the rest of the estate—that was also one of the reasons which had made the northern route that much preferable, as it offered way more cover—but hopefully the conspirators were not expecting me to get wind of the foul play at hand and would concentrate only on the path leading north. With bated breath, I inched my way closer and closer to the western edge of the grounds, only my thoughts to keep me company. I did not censure poor old Kahltron's actions: his 'betrayal' was one born out of love and concern for my well-being; rather, in my mind I applauded his loyalty which prompted him to deceive me,

having been not unlike a son to him for many a year, in order to protect me—though my face showed little of this admiration I was feeling and was instead a grimace of frustration and anxiety. As I managed to make my way to the eastern border of the estate, one single silent sigh escaped my throat: the way from there on would be a muddy marshland, a place where masking one's own tracks would be way easier, while also forcing any pursuer to abandon the horses, lest they risk serious injury.

I was feeling elated at the fact that I was making good progress, wading through the increasingly muddier mire, but, as they say, I was counting my cockatrices before they hatched. As I was essentially breaking out, I had with me only the clothes on my back, some money to afford decent lodging for up to a couple of weeks, and a small knapsack in which I kept the writing utensil that I am presently using to write the very book you are reading, a selection of shortbreads I managed to swipe from the kitchen, and a couple of full waterskins; had I been northbound, this lack of resources would not be worrying in any way, shape, or form, as the main road between the estate and the Illistrian border was a busy one, and thus littered with posts where merchants frequently stopped to let the horses drink and prepare a meal for their entourage. Regrettably, there was no such institution in the middle of the morass separating the eastern part of Hawrnydell and the mercantile republic of Transimo. As the daybreak slowly started to creep upwards—and I had managed to put a handful of leagues between myself and any possible pursuit—finally my food adventure started: meaning I was chosen as breakfast by the extremely aggressive gnat population of that zone of the marshland. Needless to say, I was forced to soldier on for as long as I could, only momentarily stopping to drink and tentatively nibble on a piece of shortbread, for fear of being so thoroughly devoured by that buzzing horde; at the beginning of the fourth day of such a forced march, the goal not clearly in sight, my rations swiftly dwindling, and the last of my willpower spent, I simply fell like a deboned trout on a conveniently placed rocky outcropping, accepting my destiny as either a refreshing drink for the midges or a banquet for the vultures slowly circling overhead.

As my vision started to blurry and the blackness of exhaustion enveloped me both in body and mind, those which I believed to be my last thoughts went to those I had left behind: would father beat his chest in the quietness of his study, away from prying eyes? Would sister wear the traditional black raiment, lining her eyes with kohl to mask their redness? Before I could answer my own thoughts, I felt my body being hoisted, an overpowering mix of spices assailing my nostrils; I only managed the tiniest of whimpers, as all air had escaped my lungs the moment this unrecognisable figure haphazardly threw me over their broad shoulders. Doubling over, I could feel through my linen shirt a warm hand firmly grasping my lower back, as my face planted itself in some rough fabric, which gave off a soothingly earthy redolence. The rocking gait of the other, together with the alien-sounding words which came out of their mouth, lulled me to a dreamless sleep.

I was brought back to wakefulness by the sizzling of oil in a pan and the fresh fragrance of glittering chives filling the air. Dumbfounded, I took in my surroundings: I was lying on a soft bed, my head resting on a single feathery pillow, while my body was covered by a rugged quilt, a trapunto quilt I ventured to guess, given both the easily discernible padding and the puffier nature of the quilt itself, quite reminiscent of an Illustrian sourdough puff pastry. The craftsmanship of the bed lining was frugal to say the least, yet charming in its simplicity and overall harmony, and of particular note was the pastiche of pastoral images and symmetric pieces adorning the various blocks of the quilt; as I carefully rose, wafts of tangy perfume exuding from the pillow shams brought back memories of a bottle of limoncello an associate of my father brought back from the Isles of Caprice. On a small wooden cupboard to my left I espied my apparel, clean of all the murk I had gathered while wading through the marshlands and neatly folded, and only then noticed I was as naked as the day I came screaming into this world. With just a tinge of red colouring my cheeks, I quietly recovered my clothes and quickly made myself presentable. Having had the time to ponder on my current situation, I was able to ascertain to a respectable degree of precision what must have transpired in the mire: after I had given up on continuing and had resigned me to become a banquet for the

beasts, someone must have found me, brought me to their home, bathed me, and washed my clothes. I was no naïve youngster drunk on tales of chivalry, so I did not in the least expect my saviour to have rescued me only out of the goodness of their heart, but I was at least hopeful that half of the money I had on me would suffice to repay such kindness. So, steeling myself for the confrontation with the mysterious owner of that house, and the haggling which would surely take place when mention of a ‘reward’ was thrown around, I opened the door on my right-hand side, which, as it was the source for the previously mentioned smell and sizzling noise, would most certainly lead to the kitchen, and gingerly peeked inside. The walls of this new room—which was the kitchen, as I oh so cunningly had guessed—were, save for the occasional smudge of soot, of a whitish hue, which clued me in on the provenience of their material: unlike those of the room I woke up in, which were comprised of run-of-the-mill clay bricks, these ones were most certainly made of—or at least lined with—Transimian kaolin clay, a material fervently sought after by alchemists and cooks alike for its resistance to heat. My amazement did not stop at the choice of masonry, though, as the stovetop also enraptured me. Divided into four different sectors, it was lined with glowing orange runes, which I immediately recognised as condensations of the essence of the Plane of Fire which chefs all over the world were clamouring for as the greatest invention for cooking since the creation of knives, as they allowed someone skilled enough to have nigh total control on the intensity of the flame. In front of the counter stood an imposing figure, nearly seven feet tall, their back turned on me: they wore a honeydew kirtle, here and there presenting small reddish stains, over a much tighter white chemise. Jutting out of the short sleeves, two swarthy arms, muscular in a way attainable only through years of physical labour, were rhythmically moving up and down, a rugged-looking cleaver firmly held in each hand—on the wooden cutting board in front, what looked like a cut of eye of round was being roughly minced. The chestnut hair, streaked ever so slightly with grey, was kept in a single braid, large at the height of the nape and getting thinner around the trapezius. My common sense—and also my self-preservation instinct in the face of those cleavers—prompted me to silently wait on the door,

savouring the aroma of chives clinging to the air. However, a rather unflattering growl from my abdomen ruined my intent almost immediately.

«**Gardes des don, the lil' ta-taille up!**» the other, which I now recognized as a female orc thanks to the inflection and the fangs protruding from the sides of her similarly swarthy visage, peered over her shoulder, directing me a toothy—or rather, should I say fangy?—smile.

I did not really understand what she said, being woefully unfamiliar with the dialect of this region, but I did catch the words 'little' and 'up', so I presumed she was commenting on my waking up. Mustering my courage, I cleared my throat, only now stopping to at least make my unruly hair presentable.

«**Ah yes, indeed, that is the truth, my fair madame**» I said, offering my humblest of bowing «**I, Laurentius of name, of the T-**» I painfully stopped myself from adding my family's name, coughing to cover it «**thank you from the deepest reaches of my heart for saving my most inept person from the predicament in whi-**»

Loth as I was to adhere to that pompous and vacuous language the preceptor of the Tarragonis family had quite literally beaten into me since I was a child, it was the only way I knew to communicate; fortunately, the woman simply hushed me with a quick gesture from one of the cleavers, provoking some smidges of mincemeat to fly around.

«**Mais la, Laurrie!**» there was a hint of exasperation in her voice «**Come see an' elp me wit de foo.**»

Cleaver still clutched in her hand, she pointed to a huge bowl to her right, near which I espied three huge eggs, the size and colour of which I had never seen afore.

«**Be a cher,**» she continued «**crack an' beat deese.**»

After an initial moment of confusion, I nodded with a broad smile and, rolling up my sleeves, I made my way towards the bowl; near the eggs, which quite surprisingly emanated a smell reminiscent of that of bitter almonds, I found a hammer and a chisel. Taking the size of these eggs into consideration, comparable to that of a citron melon, I did not even stop to ask what the tools were for and got to hammering. When I bored my way through the astonishingly hard shell, I started pouring the liquid in the bowl, repeating the process ‘till all eggs were emptied; looking around the counter, I saw an imposing whisk.

«**May I, Miss...?**» I tentatively asked, only then noticing I had forgotten to ask for my host’s name.

«**Edmée.**» she simply answered, while nodding; I had not the faintest clue whether that was her name or it was another word for giving me permission to use the whisk.

«**Thank you, Miss Edmée**» I tried my luck and, seeing as the woman simply smiled at me and went back to what she was doing—she had just finished preparing the mincemeat and she was adding it to the wok pan—I guessed that I was correct.

Grabbing the whisk with two hands, I started to beat the eggs, feeling my shoulders growing ever so sorer due to the exertion of working such an unseemly sized whisk; with a tinge of sarcasm, I thought to myself that I was finally following a workout routine as my father had so insistently tried to force me for all those years. When I felt satisfied, I took the bowl and moved near Edmée.

«**Is this to your liking, Miss Edmée?**» I gingerly asked, much like a schoolboy showing his favourite teacher a picture he had just drawn.

«**Mais la, nuff wit de Miss, it honte...**» she gruffly answered, eyeing the bowl and adding a mumbled «**It good, it good.**»



With a spryness I would not expect for her body—and her age, if the locks of white hair were any indicator—she took the bowl and went back to the counter, where only now I saw waited a pot of fluffed rice. With precise gestures, the orc lady mixed the rice with the egg wash I had made, adding various sauces which I could not recognise; as the mixture was properly incorporated, the lady walked past me with a concentrated smile, dumping the egg-and-rice concoction into the wok, starting to stir almost immediately. I fell silent, as I was enthralled by her movements; the wok, of solid steel as far as I could guess without the chance of properly inspecting it, seemed as if it were made of hydrargyrum, so smooth and fluid was her stirring. With one hand constantly on the wok-handle, Edmée started unveiling various cloches, which were hiding a plethora of greens and vegetables in general, already neatly diced, which she then added to what I now understood was an egg fried rice. A couple of minutes elapsed, when the orc lady finally let out a single sigh, removing the wok from the stove.

**«It ready! Allons, Laurrie, time to mange!»** she gleefully exclaimed, leaving me completely dumbfounded as to what those words meant and so I simply followed her to an already set table.

After helping Edmée to her chair, much to her chagrin it seemed, I finally sat in mine, waiting for the lady to start eating; as she took up the first spoonful, I respectfully bowed, and, much to my embarrassment, I started to eat like a starving man. The woman did not say anything, and simply smiled in a warm, grandmotherly way.

The best way to describe this dish was ‘rich’; the eggs, whose provenience as basilisk eggs I only discovered when I later asked Edmée for the recipe, were lighter than normal poultry eggs as far as texture was concerned, while regaling a whole new complexity to what I like to call the ‘flavourscape’—thanks in no small part, I assume, due to the negligible traces of basilisk venom present inside the yolk; the rice, strictly a leftover from the previous meal for added crunch, was cooked to perfection and no grain stuck to the others, unlike the flavourless hodge-podge my father used to try and force down my throat to, in his words, ‘help bulking up’; the minced meat,

an eye of round of a breed known as zebu as I had correctly guessed, was optimal in granting a bit of coarseness to the dish to contrast the smoothness of the greens ensemble. Such was my engrossment with this dish that Edmée forced me to take some with me as she sent me on my way, citing that she had things to do and no time to look after each and every boy running away. Much to my amazement, I was feeling loth to abandon this house which I had been in for less than a couple of hours; Edmée's culinary prowess and kindness had won me over. Alas, the road was beckoning me, and with it many more dishes to discover; as I finished cleaning the dishes, I bowed to hide my contrition, to which the woman answered by hugging me tightly. With directions for the nearest city, the port of Transimo as luck would have it, I left the orc's house, setting off into the pleasant afternoon air.