

A Neoplatonic Feast (It's Ideal Soul Food)

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By EMILY EAKIN

"Not best for the wealthy," advised a hand-lettered sign next to the pumpkin ravioli. "Dangerously cold and wet," cautioned another, planted near a dish of oregano-strewn eggplant. The sign in front of the braised sausage skewers said simply: "Dangerous." It was perilous dining last week at the Pierpont Morgan Library in Manhattan, where men in doublets and plumed caps and women in brocade bodices and swishing silks (along with numerous couples in decidedly more contemporary black tie) convened for a sumptuous neoplatonist feast. In the library's soaring atrium, some sat at candlelit tables sipping spiced wine laced with gold dust. Others stood listening as delicate Renaissance melodies wafted down from a balcony. With tiny silver seafood forks, they picked at plates heaped high with tempting morsels, valiantly trying not to incur a debilitating humoral imbalance.

"Not one dish suits everybody," Carolin C. Young, a dining historian and the evening's scholarly M.C., had warned during a talk in the library's lecture hall that preceded the meal. Resplendent in a russet silk and gold brocade ensemble custom made for the occasion, she conducted the eager but untutored guests on a crash course in the art of 15th-century dining. "If you're feeling choleric, your body has become warm and dry, and you need cold and wet," she said. "If you're melancholic, that's cold and dry. You need more warm and wet."

Ms. Young, 33, is one of a new breed of food studies scholars who view meals not as ephemeral events of passing biological significance but rather as windows onto a culture's most pressing concerns. While food historians have tended to focus on broad dietary trends and culinary historians have studied recipes, Ms. Young zeros in on a single repast, extracting from it a wealth of social meaning. As she summed up the approach in her opening remarks: "To dine is not merely to eat."

Clearly, the evening at the Morgan, which was sponsored by the Italian Cultural Foundation of America and Sotheby's Institute of Art, was intended as a vivid illustration of that point. Drawing on a chapter from her new book, "Apples of Gold in Settings of Silver: Stories of Dinner as a Work of Art" (Simon & Schuster), and employing the library's stately interiors as atmospheric backdrop, Ms. Young turned a feast originally staged by nine 15th-century Italian humanists in a villa outside Florence into an edible history lesson in Renaissance thought.

Held at the Villa Careggi on Nov. 7, 1468, the banquet, Ms. Young argued, was a revolutionary event. While no complete record of it survives (the menu was never written down), it was an experiment in Neoplatonist ideals of friendship and harmony that, she insisted, "really did change the way Western civilization thought about the meal." In some ways, she said, it was the first modern meal. Its host was 19-year-old Lorenzo de' Medici, scion of the powerful Medici banking family. Legendary patrons of the arts, the Medicis departed from convention by treating those they supported as equals - including

the teenage Michelangelo, who ate with the family. "At Careggi people gathered as friends," Ms. Young said.

However, it was the banquet's chronicler and guiding spirit, **Marsilio Ficino**, who gave that novel behavior a grand, philosophical rationale. A founding member of Florence's Neoplatonist Academy and a translator of Plato, Ficino helped spark Italian interest in ancient Greece, promoting a synthesis of classical philosophy and Christian theology that became a hallmark of Renaissance humanism. In particular, Ms. Young said, Ficino was inspired by Plato's concept of friendship as a mirror of divine love.

From the gathering's date (supposedly the anniversary of Plato's birth, the same day on which, 81 years later, he is thought to have died) to the participants (nine like-minded poets and scholars) and the lofty discussion of the Symposium, Plato's treatise on love, that followed the feast, Ficino conceived the evening as a tribute to the philosopher. Later, he commemorated the evening in his own book on love, "De Amore." He was also inspired by other ancient thinkers and came up with a few scandalous ideas of his own. From the Roman writer Varro, Ficino took the rule that the number of guests at a banquet should range between three, the number of the Graces, and nine, the number of the Muses. (At the Morgan, tables were set for three.)

More radically, he advocated the pursuit of sensual pleasure. At the time, such a view was considered almost heretical. Ms. Young cited Ficino's friend Platina, who was arrested by the pope and tortured for daring to include the word pleasure in the title of his cookbook. But for Ficino, she said, stimulating all five senses was a means of perfecting mind and body and coming closer to God.

Though it's not clear where at Careggi his banquet was held - there were no dining rooms at the time, and a table could well have been set up outside - Ms. Young said it doubtless included multiple sources of sensual delight: spotless white tablecloths and napkins, Flemish tapestries, ewers of perfumed water, citrus-scented candles, and music. A talented lyre player, Ficino believed "music was key to bringing the soul into flight," Ms. Young said. (The banquet might or might not have included forks, she added. Just beginning to catch on in 15th-century Florence, forks were considered personal accessories, more apt to be carried in a pocket than doled out with the other utensils at mealtime.) Still, Ms. Young stressed, Ficino was no hedonist. A celibate who eventually became a priest, he was inspired by classical ideas of balance and harmony, most obviously in his elaborate dietary theory.

According to Aristotle and Galen, a physician of the second century A.D., the body was composed of four humors: blood, red bile (choler), black bile (melancholy) and phlegm. Each humor was in turn ascribed properties drawn from the four elements. Blood, for example, was associated with the air and considered warm and wet, while melancholy was associated with the earth and considered cold and dry. When the humors were in equilibrium, a body was healthy. Whenever an imbalance occurred, illness was the likely result. Only through careful diet could equilibrium be restored.

Ficino was a staunch believer in the humoral science, adapting it for a scholarly lifestyle manual he published in 1489. In a section titled "The Special Enemies of Scholars Are Five: Phlegm, Black Bile, Sexual Intercourse, Gluttony and Sleeping in the Morning," he laid out strict guidelines for a long and healthy intellectual life. Eggplant was off limits (too much black bile), as were heavy wines. Vegetables were categorically denounced, in addition, Ms. Young said, to all food that was "burnt, dark, roasted, fried, hard, dry or stale." As for pork, she added, Ficino thought it suitable only for "bodies that are piglike, such as rustics."

"To cook for these humanists must have been quite a task," Ms. Young observed. After her lecture, one could wonder whether the guests on that momentous night at Careggi were served any food at all. However, Ms. Young knew better. "Ficino believed that 'only the meal embraces all parts of man,' " she said. "It was about feeding our ideas and the exchange of friendship as well as about feeding the body."

"Shall we feast?" she concluded. There were no objections.