

BOOK REVIEW

Anna Martellotti, *La cucina normannoaraba alla corte di Guglielmo II di Sicilia*, Florence: Olschki, 2024, 384 pp. ISBN 9788822268952.



Anna Martellotti has maintained a deep-seated interest in medieval gastronomy, particularly focusing on its intersections with the Arab world as evidenced in *Il Liber de ferculis di Giambonino da Cremona. La gastronomia araba in Occidente nella trattatistica dietetica* (2001), and early Italian culinary texts such as *I ricettari di Federico II* (2005). In her work *Linguistica e cucina* (2012), she illuminates the parallels between language

and cuisine from both synchronic and diachronic viewpoints. Martellotti's latest publication, *La cucina normannoaraba alla corte di Guglielmo II di Sicilia* (2024) offers a fascinating exploration of historical events through the lens of culinary heritage, shedding light on the intricate connections between Norman and Arab cuisine during the reign of William II of Sicily.

Martellotti's investigation uncovers the details within Norman culinary manuals, revealing a treasure trove of valuable perspectives into the origin and development of late medieval European cuisine. By meticulously comparing texts based on ingredients, equipment usage, preparation methods, and presentation styles, she provides a comprehensive revision of culinary history, highlighting the significant influence of Arab culinary traditions on Sicilian

cuisine. This book elucidates how the cuisine of Baghdad rapidly disseminated throughout the Islamic territories, including Sicily, following the conquest of Palermo in 831. Through detailed analysis, Martellotti demonstrates how Norman Sicilian cuisine emerged as a fusion of Arab and Norman culinary practices, reflecting the cultural exchanges that occurred during this period of history.

Martellotti guides us on a journey through the Norman compilations, which initially introduced the opulent Norman-Arab gastronomy to England, while in southern Italy, Frederick II's illustrious treatises contributed a further array of Arab-influenced dishes. By the dawn of the fourteenth century, these novel culinary creations had permeated the entirety of Europe. As the century drew to a close, the eminent royal manuscripts such as the *Forme of Cury* and *Viandier* solidified the emergence of a unified European cuisine – vibrant, aromatic, and significantly 'sweeter'.

From 'lasagna' to 'losenge' and 'potage' to 'pudding', Martellotti draws fascinating parallels between Arab and Norman culinary traditions, uncovering shared elements recognisable in meals that we have today, creating an effortless link between past and present. She references literary works such as *One Thousand and One Nights*, Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* enriching the narrative with cultural context and historical anecdotes. The comparisons between preparation methods and culinary preferences are, at times, rendered with a levity – the Arab preference for meat sauces gives rise to observations on how this particular method failed to meet the 'Germanic penchant for the tactile sensation of meat between the teeth' (p. 138) – that also infuses character and cultural difference, bringing those distant times to life through the multisensorial tool which is food.

Martellotti's exploration extends beyond mere culinary analysis; she also offers insights into the socio-political dynamics of the time. Through references to historical figures and events, she paints a vivid picture of Sicilian court life and the cultural exchange between Arab and Norman rulers. Furthermore, Martellotti's examination of language evolution and phonetic changes in food names adds depth

to her narrative, illustrating how culinary history is intertwined with linguistic development.

In summary, *La cucina normannoaraba alla corte di Guglielmo II di Sicilia* is an enthralling journey through the rich tapestry of Sicilian culinary heritage. Martellotti's meticulous research and engaging storytelling make this book a valuable contribution to the study of medieval gastronomy and cultural exchange. Whether you are a historian, a food enthusiast, or simply curious about the intersection of food and culture, this book offers a fascinating exploration of Sicily's culinary past.

ALESSANDRA PINO

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Alessandra Pino is an expert on the intersections of the Gothic, food, and cultural memory. She holds degrees from 'L'Orientale' University, Naples (Italy), and from the University of Westminster (UK, MA in Translation Studies); she was awarded a PhD in Food, Cultural Memory, and the Gothic in 2022. Alessandra is the co-author of *A Gothic Cookbook*, which digs into food themes and motifs in a series of classic and contemporary novels from the nineteenth century to the present day and the co-host of *Fear Feasts*, a podcast which analyses the horror genre – films and books – through the lens of food. She publishes and speaks/lectures on the history of food, cultural memory, the supernatural, horror and the Gothic in journals, anthologies, TV and podcasts.