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# GIACOMO CASANOVA

## THE PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

Parvenu, scholar, occultist, spy, gambler, fugitive, gourmet, and wine lover—Giacomo Casanova was many things besides an inveterate womanizer. The autobiography of the famous Venetian (1725–98) is long and unusually detailed, but it is normally plundered for only the most salacious stories, which give us less than half the story and only half the man. As Anne Krehbiel explains, the complete text reveals a far fuller character—and a life lived precariously and relentlessly in pursuit of status, favor, wealth, and, above all, pleasure

The 12 volumes of Casanova's autobiography are a scrupulous account of his life, rich in detail, based on diaries and letters and, for the most part, historically cross-referenced with real events and people. They are a fabulous romp, not only through countless beds, upholstered carriages, and secluded gardens, but through a very vivid 18th-century Europe. There are masked balls in Venice, Naples, and Rome, picnics at Viennese palaces, skating parties on the frozen Dutch Amstel, musical soirées in country houses, adventurous post-coach journeys, moonlit bathing parties, and Mediterranean jaunts in cushioned feluccas.

Throughout, Casanova never fails to mention the wines he drank. His constant attention to food and wine show him to have been a true epicure with a sincere interest in local fare, wherever he was traveling, and a keen observer. Everything is recorded obsessively and woven into a seamless chronicle, very occasionally interspersed with sober reflection, more usually with self-justification but also with self-knowledge and honesty: "Cultivating whatever gave pleasure to my senses was always the chief business of my life; I have never found any occupation more important," he declares. "This, he continues, certainly included the pleasures of the table: "I have always liked highly seasoned dishes, macaroni prepared by a good Neapolitan cook, olla podrida, good sticky salt cod from Newfoundland, high game on the very edge, and cheeses whose perfection is reached when the little creatures which inhabit them become visible. As for women, I have always found that the one I was in love with smelled good."<sup>2</sup> He never descends into snobbery, rejects half-baked "refinement," and prefers what is real: "What a depraved taste!" he exclaims in mock indignation. "It is precisely by virtue of my coarse tastes, I have the temerity to believe, that I am happier than other men, since I am convinced that my tastes make me capable of more pleasure."<sup>3</sup>

As the son of an actor and shoemaker's daughter-turned-actress, Casanova was born into the demimonde: always in touch with the aristocracy but never belonging to it; admired and despised in equal measure. Granted patronage by a noble Venetian family, he received an education. Neither of independent wealth nor of noble birth, too intelligent and well read ever to be content with a lowly position, too inconstant to stick to one occupation or one place, and invariably governed by his desires, he looked for patronage, position, and favor across Europe. His extraordinary life took him from Venice several times across Italy, to Corfu, Constantinople, France, Austria, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, England, Russia, Poland, Spain, and eventually to Bohemia. In a world where there was little or no social mobility, where dire poverty and disease were omnipresent, where justice existed only for the privileged, where every sphere, secular or spiritual, was pervaded by venality and corruption, Casanova lived by ingratiating himself, by cultivating powerful friends, by courting, by gambling, by becoming an international celebrity. His notoriety after escaping the Leads in Venice gained him entry at Europe's numerous minor and major courts but also banished him from his beloved home republic and prompted his peripatetic life.

### Every conceivable luxury

On his travels throughout his native Italy, Casanova enjoyed numerous local wines: Refosco in Istria,<sup>4</sup> Chianti in Loreto,<sup>5</sup> Sangiovese in Cesena,<sup>6</sup> Montefiascone in Rome,<sup>7</sup> and so-called Gatta in Treviso, of which he says, "Gatta wine does not intoxicate, it enlivens. It is drunk without water and is a wine which keeps scarcely a year." However, his very first amorous encounter—in Venice, of course—with the sisters Nanetta and Marta, is helped along by "two bottles of Cyprus wine,"<sup>8</sup>



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a sweet wine, directly imported, like many wines brought to the Republic by anyone whose business it was to be there—Slavonian soldiers, for instance, “who did nothing but sing, eat garlic, smoke tobacco which poisoned the air, and drink so-called Slavonian wine. It is like ink and only Slavonians can drink it,” says an indignant teenage Casanova.<sup>9</sup> Those who had the means had access to foreign wines. As the dinner guest of the Castilian army proveditor in Ancona, an acquaintance made at an inn, the 18-year-old Casanova’s description hints at the choice available: “Don Sancho’s supper was exquisite [...] he gave us white truffles, several kinds of shellfish, the best fish from the Adriatic, still champagne, Peralta sherry, and Pedro Ximenes.”<sup>10</sup> Fortified wines traveled well and were precious; in Constantinople, Casanova was given “a dozen bottles of malmsey from Ragusa and a dozen of genuine Scopolowine.”<sup>11</sup> “The genuine Scopolo,” from the island of Skopolos in the Aegean Sea, “was very scarce,” remarks Casanova.<sup>12</sup>

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But we also get a sense that in the cosmopolitan milieu of Venice, every conceivable luxury was available. His affair with the still unidentified MM inspired in him a love of Burgundy. The entire episode is emblematic of the sort of adventures Casanova got himself into. MM was a nun of noble birth in a convent on the Venetian island of Murano, holy vows neither here nor there, her wealth allowing her freedom; apparently some maskers at the Venetian Carnival were nuns, convents often being used as depositories for daughters for all sorts of reasons, the women having little choice in the matter.<sup>13</sup> Vows meant little, as Casanova himself says: “There was not a nun in Venice whom one could not have for money if one knew how to go about it.”<sup>14</sup> MM’s lover was the French ambassador to Venice, wealthy and inclined to voyeurism. It was for his benefit that MM arranged assignations with Casanova, who soon realized what his task was in the lavishly furnished little casino (brothel) where he also enjoyed exquisite meals: “The service was of Sèvres porcelain. Eight made dishes composed the supper; they were sat on silver boxes filled with hot water which kept the food always hot. It was a choice and delicious supper. We drank only Burgundy, and we emptied a bottle of

‘oeil de perdrix’ Champagne and another of some sparkling wine for gaiety [...]. It was obvious that she had a lover who had taught her.”<sup>15</sup>

This inspired Casanova on to rent a casino of his own where he ordered his landlord to “prepare a supper for two, warning him that I wanted no wines except Burgundy and Champagne.”<sup>16</sup> The food, this time, came in “Saxon porcelain: game, sturgeon, truffles, oysters and perfect wines. I only reproached [the landlord] with having forgotten to set out hard-boiled eggs, anchovies, and prepared vinegars on a dish to make a salad.”<sup>17</sup> Casanova swore by hard-boiled eggs to sustain his amorous prowess and loved to eat a salad of egg whites dressed with olive oil from Lucca.<sup>18</sup> On another occasion, Casanova hosted both MM and her French lover. Having set out to impress, Casanova succeeded: “The Ambassador, an epicure, having highly approved of the Burgundy [no further specification is ever given], the Champagne and the Graves, which I gave him after oysters from Arsenal [...] was delighted.”<sup>19</sup> His love of Burgundy stayed with him; it was the wine he ordered years later, in 1776 in Warsaw, when he was challenged to a duel by a Polish nobleman over some perceived insult over a beautiful singer at the opera. Knowing that it might well be his last dinner, he sent “to the Court for some excellent Burgundy wine.”<sup>20</sup> In the end, he killed his opponent and escaped with a bullet lodged in his left hand. “I find myself alone and without a sword in a country side covered with snow, wounded, and not knowing the way back to Warsaw.”<sup>21</sup>

**An epicure in exile**

By 1755, Casanova had made many enemies in Venice—by gambling and getting himself into debt, by reading forbidden books, and by dabbling in the dark arts. Disregarding the advice of his benefactor and friend, the patrician Signor Bragadin, to flee, Casanova was arrested by order of the state inquisitors in July 1755 and “sentenced to five years’ imprisonment under the Leads, the notorious prison in the Doge’s palace, for atheism on September 12, 1755,” at the age of 30.<sup>22</sup> By the grace of the Inquisitors and the generosity of Signor Bragadin, he was allowed more food, books, and wine—as well as fresh lemons—to ease his extreme privations. Fleas and rats abounded. Throughout his imprisonment, quite tellingly, he mused on religion and philosophy but never once mentioned his longing for a woman. Ingeniously, he escaped after just over a year and fled—via Valdobbiadene, Trento, Bolzano, and Munich—to Paris, more intent than ever to make his fortune.

He no longer had his wide-eyed enthusiasm and comes across as more sober than his pre-prison self. But food and wine were still chief delights, as were women. He set up house in Paris, where he helped establish a lottery, and boasted: “Everyone talked of the excellent table I kept. I had fowl fed on rice in a dark room; they were white as snow, with an exquisite flavour. To the excellence of the French cuisine I added whatever the other cuisines of Europe offered to tempt the most refined palates. My macaroni al sughillo, my rice sometimes as pilau, sometimes in cagnoni, my olla podridas,



Casanova’s native Venice, which meant for him not only patronage and pleasure but eventually prosecution and prison, from which he escaped never to return

were the talk of town.”<sup>23</sup> How these dishes were prepared is left to our imagination; al sughillo means merely “in sauce,” while cagnoni suggests a kind of risotto. While his affairs—of business or the heart—are recounted in detail, the table is as worthy of comment as the bed. In gastronomic matters, Casanova was ahead of his time, starting but later abandoning a “dictionary of cheeses,” and seriously composing an article on Parmesan.<sup>24</sup> In Sorrento, he marveled at “ices flavoured with lemon, with chocolate, with coffee and pot cheeses than which nothing more delicious could be imagined.”<sup>25</sup>

On a trade mission to Amsterdam, Casanova encountered what must have been one of wine’s earliest mock-ups, when a Dutch businessman gave him what was allegedly a South African wine: “Seeing me delighted with the excellence of his red Capewine, he laughed and says that he made it himself by mixing Burgundy with Malaga.”<sup>26</sup> At the Elector’s pleasure palace in Brühl, near Cologne, he held a magnificent party—a

“luncheon” for the ladies: 24 plates of “English oysters ended only with the emptying of the twentieth bottle of Champagne. When the luncheon itself began, the company was already tipsy [...]. Not a single drop of water was drunk, for neither Rhine wine nor Tokay will tolerate it.”<sup>27</sup> Still in Germany, a German count and general in the Austrian army gave Casanova a present of “a bottle of Rhine wine with a label bearing the date 1748.”<sup>28</sup> This must have been in 1759. “Exquisite” Rhine wine was also served with salmon trout in Einsiedeln (Switzerland), where for a few self-delusory days, Casanova entertained the idea of becoming a monk—just until the next woman crossed his path. But Switzerland also presented him with “excellent Neuchâtel wine” and “wine from La Côte, which was delicious, too.”<sup>29</sup> In Avignon, he drank “only white Hermitage, a wine of the utmost excellence.”<sup>30</sup> In Madrid, “the good wine from La Mancha kept [him] at table for two hours.”<sup>31</sup>

In 1763, aged 38, Casanova arrived in England, a country and culture that was alien to him and that he observed with curiosity: "The Englishman is a meat-eater. He eats scarcely any bread, and he insists that he is economical because he saves himself the expense of soup and dessert [...]. I tried to get used to their beer; but I had to give it up after a week. The bitter taste it left in my mouth was intolerable. The vintner supplied me with French wines which were excellent because they were natural; but I had to pay high prices for them."<sup>32</sup> Even today, this might elicit a ring of recognition. While he considered the available Port "expensive and bad,"<sup>33</sup> he came to the conclusion that "nothing is finer than the English roads, and nothing more attractive than the English countryside, it lacks only the vine."<sup>34</sup> Usually suave and polyglot, he was unable to speak English, and this kept Casanova at a relative distance from England and its people. In Spain, however, it was less the language than the pervasiveness of inhuman Catholicism that put him off. He also felt short-changed when it came to wine: "In Spain, where the wines are excellent, especially on the coast where I was, close to Malaga and Alicante, a foreigner cannot get a passable glass of wine except with the greatest difficulty [...]. Is it the ignorance of vintners who are rogues everywhere on earth but merciless scoundrels in Spain?"<sup>35</sup>

Casanova did not stand on ceremony or luxury—only on quality. On a mission for the Duke of Kurland (today's Latvia, then part of the Kingdom of Poland) to inspect copper and iron mines, he and a companion set out in a carriage, "armed with saber and musket. Every two to three hours we came to some place where we changed horses; and we refreshed ourselves by eating something and drinking good wine from the Rhine or from France, of which we had an abundant supply in the carriage."<sup>36</sup> Arriving late at a post station between Florence and Bologna, with La Corticella in tow, an Italian dancer 22 years his junior, to whom he referred as "the little madcap," he was told there was nothing to eat. But Casanova laughed at the innkeeper: "he had butter, eggs, macaroni, rice, Parmesan cheese, bread and good wine." And yet, age was beginning to tell: "Stuffed with macaroni as we were, and tipsy from Chianti and Montepulciano, we did not feel like making love."<sup>37</sup> This is not something a young Casanova would ever have said.

**Virtue and vice**

When fortune was kind to him, Casanova was generous and shared his wealth liberally, treating many poor girls to finery, silk stockings, and jewelry and tipping everyone freely. In Rome, invited to sup "only polenta and pork chops" with a poor man of the church and his family, Casanova ordered his valet to get six bottles of Orvieto and a ham.<sup>38</sup> On other occasions, of course, Casanova also used wine to seduce: "At dessert, I decided to get her tipsy [...]. I gave her a glass of Muscat from Lunel."<sup>39</sup> This way he got a girl of 14 to spend the night with him in Genoa, and this was a comparatively mild escapade. Many of the episodes he recounts are shocking, even criminal. But they prevent us from assuming that the world was ever an innocent place. Depravity is as old as mankind.

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Nor should we indulge in any very obvious armchair psychologizing. There are theories that Casanova was bisexual and used his inclination to gain favors from the powerful, perpetuating his own philandering myth as a cover-up—but that seems far-fetched. What we have in front of us is not merely the autobiography of a flawed, complex, conflicted, and essentially solitary man, but a fascinating contemporary account of 18th-century life. Casanova had no familial, political, or religious axe to grind and, thus, had no motive to misrepresent his world.

Penned by a frail, old Casanova, his autobiography doubtless allowed him to relive his adventures in order to escape the bleakness of the cold Bohemian castle where he ended his days as a poor, lonely, and misunderstood librarian, more tolerated than welcomed by his hosts. He did not manage to finish his autobiography and died in 1798, aged 73, with the manuscript still incomplete. He was an avid correspondent, a published writer, and, if not an intellectual, certainly a thinker and man of letters. His central tenet is one that many of us still hold today, even if few of us pursue it quite so single-mindedly: "I have always enjoyed good health, and having once learned that what impairs it is always excess, either in eating or abstaining, I have never had any physician but myself. But I have found that abstinence is the more dangerous by far."<sup>40</sup>



Opposite: Oysters were often washed down by Casanova with Champagne. Above: While Casanova enjoyed many local wines, he had a particular passion for Burgundy

**Notes**

1. Giacomo Casanova, *History of My Life*, 12 volumes, translated by WR Trask (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1966), Vol.1, Preface, p.32.
2. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.1, Preface, p.32.
3. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.1, Preface, p.33.
4. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.1, Ch.8, p.207.
5. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.1, Ch.8, p.218.
6. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.2, Ch.11, p.300.
7. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.11, Ch.8, p.222.
8. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.1, Ch.5, p.136.
9. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.1, Ch.6, p.175.
10. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.2, Ch.1, p.15.
11. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.2, Ch.4, p.100.
12. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.2, Ch.4, p.100.
13. John Masters, *Casanova* (Penguin Classic, London, 2001), p.94.
14. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.4, Ch.9, p.155.
15. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.4, Ch.3, p.39.
16. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.4, Ch.3, p.46.
17. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.4, Ch.3, p.46.
18. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.4, Ch.4, p.66.
19. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.4, Ch.7, p.110.
20. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.10, Ch.8, p.183.
21. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.10, Ch.8, p.186.
22. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.4, Notes, p.345.
23. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.5, Ch.10, p.229.
24. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.8, Ch.9, p.249.
25. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.11, Ch.10, p.284.
26. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.5, Ch.6, p.131.
27. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.6, Ch.2, p.51.
28. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.6, Ch.2, p.56.
29. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.6, Ch.6, p.128.
30. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.7, Ch.3, p.53.
31. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.11, Ch.3, p.83.
32. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.9, Ch.7, p.181.
33. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.9, Ch.9, p.233.
34. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.9, Ch.10, p.257.
35. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.11, Ch.4, p.112.
36. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.10, Ch.4, p.88.
37. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.7, Ch.12, p.260.
38. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.7, Ch.9, p.190.
39. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.7, Ch.6, p.128.
40. Casanova, *History of My Life*, Vol.1, Preface, p.30.