

Feeding frenzy

"A meeting without food," to mutilate an old Italian proverb, "is like life without love" "come la vita senza l'amore." For how can we absorb and assimilate so much science without the benefit of at least an elegant opening reception with some facilitative high energy precursors?

On the old continent of Europe such scientific meetings are often held in picturesque places replete with history, tradition, and ancient ruins. The opening ceremony begins with speeches of varying brevity and languages, by congress and scientific society presidents, the all too usual speakers, and officials not too important or busy to attend.

But where is the food? And where is the wine? For a meal without wine ("pranzo senza vino") is indeed like life without love. But wait, first a classical concert. Respectfully, and with varying degrees of rapture, the guests listen to classical pieces by Corelli, Albinoni, and Monteverdi; and show their appreciation by applauding after every movement of Mozart's Serenade in G.

At last it is time to go to the banqueting hall. The doors open. Is it the Vandal cohorts of Genseric that are approaching? Is it a crowd that has fasted for weeks in anticipation of the event? Could this be the end of Ramadan? But no, for the Saracens were turned back in 732, and we are in the land of the once victorious Charles Martel, the Hammer.

Repudiating the prudent heart diet, the crowd rushes to the buffet, pushing all obstacles aside. Five pairs of hands converge on one single shrimp, and food is snatched out of the hands of waitresses. Some people pick up whole trays, others full bottles of wine. A man steps on a young woman's toes; a blonde matron projects herself unstoppably towards the hors d'oeuvres, leaving behind a trail of bruised smaller men. Within minutes entire tables of neatly arranged tarts and sandwiches are devastated, the food vanishing as in the wake of an army of locusts.

Soon nothing is left but empty plates, empty bottles, and trash. Is this the work of the Exterminating Angel? Remember Luis Buñuel's 1962 movie, where high society guests, mysteriously and inexplicably shut up in their elegant banqueting hall, end up behaving like beasts, fighting over chairs and drinks and scrambling for scraps of food? For like it or not, when the chips are down, the veneer of human civilization is still pretty thin.