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The Global History of the Cutlets

It's all very well saying ‘cutlet’, but what exactly do we mean? We all have our own idea of the perfect cutlet, but we know that there can't be only one type. Ancient cuisine is populated by a myriad of proto-cutlets that had some features in common with the modern version, but were far removed from the current model. Ever since the cutlet became more than just a gastronomic product, embodying the role of a regional specialty, everyone has felt compelled to explain the circumstances of its birth. For the Milanese, for example, it was essential to prove that the cutlet was not a modern invention but had already been present in the city since the Middle Ages. Luca Cesari guides us on this journey to discover a seemingly simple and versatile dish that appeared in medieval times and spread not only to Milan but also to other major European cities such as London, Vienna, and Paris, starting with the legends that have been passed down over the centuries, straddling truth and tradition.

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1. *What are we talking about when we talk about a cutlet*

What it means when something is fried

If we had to explain to someone what a cutlet was, surely the first thing we'd say would be that it is *fried*.

The idea that the cutlet's very nature includes that wonderful dry, crunchiness that we know and love seems so absolutely taken for granted that it seems almost superfluous to note, something that's just obvious—but it hasn't always been that way. It may seem surprising that for a long time "cutlet" meant a specific cut of meat that could be cooked in many different ways. Today the world of haute cuisine doesn't pay much to old-fashioned recipes; the term "cutlet" refers to a method of preparation, with rare exceptions.

First of all, we need to find a shared terminology so we can understand each other. Starting with the basics, we can think of frying as one of the three most common ways to prepare food. These are: cooking in water, with dry heat, or frying.

The first kind uses water or broth in varying quantities, from cooking with steam to complete immersion. Generally cooking takes place around 100°C. The second method consists of putting the food in contact with dry heat, using either air or a heated surface. The most common examples are the oven, a hot pan, or the grill. The medium that transfers the heat is the air, as well as the material that the food rests on.

The third and final method is frying, in which the food is put in contact with a fat at a high temperature (over 100°C—at lower temperatures it's called either "cooking in oil" or "confit"). There are several different typologies of frying (which we'll discuss below), depending on the quantity of fat used as well as the fat remaining in the food when done.

These methods of cooking can be combined with each other and then have particular results; sometimes it's not easy to draw the boundaries between one and another. Some traditional recipes—for example, Puglian crackers called *taralli*—call for a dough of water, flour, and other ingredients that have to be boiled briefly and then thereafter put into the oven for the final baking. The opposite is true for *testaroli*, the typical pasta of the Lunigiana area between Liguria and Tuscany: the pasta is cooked on a red-hot pan, then cut into diamond-shaped pieces and boiled before being drained and served as a pasta dish.

True frying can also be subdivided into a few categories, depending on the kind of fat used.[1] If it's just a little, it's called "browning": it can be the first phase of cooking, usually followed by the addition of another kind of liquid. The fat stays inside the food and is used to obtain a browned, delicious-smelling surface around the food cooked in this first part of the cooking process (thanks to Maillard reactions[2])—something that also influences the food's final taste.

[1] For the classification of various kinds of frying, see Allan Bay, *Friggere alla perfezione*, Giunti Editore, Florence 2023 and Servet Gulum Sumnu, Serpil Sahin, *Advances in Deep-Fat Frying of Foods*, CRC Press Taylor & Francis Group, Boca Raton (FL) 2009.

[2] By "Maillard reactions", we mean the chemical transformation that takes place during the cooking of foods with sugars and proteins, at high temperatures. It's responsible for the release of the typical smell of cooking meat or just-baked bread. You can find a simple, clear explanation in Dario Bressanini, *La scienza della carne. La chimica della bistecca e dell'arrosto*, Gribaudo, Milan 2016

If on the other hand more fat is used, but not enough to completely cover the food, it's referred to simply as "frying." The fat used in this case is not really part of the dish but rather simply the medium of transmission of the heat. Inevitably, some of it will still be on the surface of the food, but that's not really the goal—indeed, the food is drained and dabbed with paper towels before being served. This is the typical way to fry a cutlet; the method calls for the cutlet to be turned over one or more times so that both sides are cooked, and this same method is used for countless dishes where something is fried.

The second way to categorize fried foods is by the shell that covers them. Apart from rare exceptions, like French fries—whose starchy part provides a surface that's gets perfectly crunchy when fried—foods usually come coated in some sort of film that acts as a barrier between the food and the boiling oil.

This method has two main functions: to make a membrane that is dry on the outside, preventing the oil from getting in, and also to prevent the moisture from escaping. It also is supposed to keep the food inside it whole, like for breaded meatballs or other things that are made from mixes. Frying the food in this way, with the right shell—uniformly and tightly coating the outside—makes for a fried food that's crunchy outside and soft inside. Usually the materials used range from just simply flour that foods are rolled in to create a very thin barrier, or a batter made from water and flour (or other semiliquid batters), to the typical cutlet breading: a double coating of beaten eggs and breadcrumbs.

From the technical (and historical, as we'll see) point of view, this sort of coating is not necessary to be considered a fried food. If I take a fish and, without dredging it in flour or in batter, just cook it in a frying pan with a lot of oil, I'll still get a fried fish. Once it's cooked it'll be soggy, browned, or dried out (depending on how big it is and how long it's cooked), but that doesn't change the definition: it'll still be a fried fish. This is an important point for understanding historical recipes, especially the oldest ones.

Brief Philosophy of Fried Foods

Nowadays we're used to food bloggers who discuss all of human knowledge, important chefs being treated like rock stars, and (above all) we don't think there's anything wrong with a politician, academic, or another celebrity talking about gastronomy. Food, in all of its many aspects, has become part of public discourse—and we consider that completely normal.

It hasn't always been like that: to the contrary, for centuries it was the opposite. That's why it's not easy to find specific references to the technical details of cooking apart from recipes written by (and usually for) cooks. This difficulty has an impact on the line of inquiry we're about to embark upon.

The famous Italian cookbook writer Pellegrino Artusi, at the end of the preface to his 1891 book *Science in the Kitchen and The Art of Eating Well*, wrote: "I would not want, because I've taken an interest in culinary matters, to be dismissed as a glutton or as a big eater: I protest against this less-than-honorable appellation, because I am neither the former nor the latter. I love the beautiful and the good wherever I find it, and it repulses me to see the grace of God mangled (as is sometimes said)."[3]

The fear of being taken for an insatiable binger, rather than being recognized as an expert in gastronomy, was something that Artusi had in common with other important personages of his era—starting with the French politician and gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. It was Brillat-Savarin himself who laid the foundations for gastronomic discussions that weren't just about stuffing one's face, but rather as a discipline worthy of study. He published a book called *The Physiology of Taste*, which became a classic in the

[3] Pellegrino Artusi, *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiar bene*, Landi, Florence 1891, p. Viii.

field.[4] We're in 1825 and French cuisine had already been considered for a long time to be the highest expression of cooking in the West. The French had been able to transform it into an instrument of diplomacy. Tenaciously proud of their cuisine, they didn't hesitate to train chefs from all different countries (including many Italians), chefs who would later spread their cuisine and its prestige.

Despite that, writing about gastronomy in Enlightenment France was still not looked upon well. At that time Brillat-Savarin was an esteemed judge in the supreme court of appeals; it was a prestigious position, one which he had earned after having been a lawyer, politician, and a military officer. Precisely because he wanted to protect his good name, he published *The Physiology of Taste* anonymously, and paid the printing out of his own pocket—this to avoid being taken for a glutton, just like Artusi a half century later. Brillat-Savarin died just a few months later, but not before having seen the success of his book at the expense of his anonymity (his cover was quickly blown).

In the book there's a whole chapter dedicated to frying, with the following passage:

> The true value of frying lies in the *surprise*: this is what that onslaught of boiling liquid is called, one that carbonizes and renders golden, at the very moment of immersion, the external surface of the body that has been put into it. Through this surprise a sort of involucrum that contains the object, prevents the fat from getting into it, and concentrates the juices that then go through an intense internal cooking that gives the food its very taste. In order that the surprise happens, it's necessary that the liquid has acquired sufficient heat such that its action is brusque and instantaneous, but it does not get to that point without having been exposed for quite a while to a high flame.[5]

Brillat-Savarin's idea is the same one we have today: that thin, golden crust that we all yearn for. His description is focused on the end effect of the immersion in boiling oil, so the dry, crunchy crust protects the soft contents. In his day this kind of little fried treat were already a hit at high-society lunches: "Fried foods are much desired at banquets: they introduce an element of heat; they are pleasing to the sight, preserve their primitive taste, and can be eaten with one's hands, something that elegant ladies appreciate." [6]

Of course, this sort of thing is today just taken for granted (or at least what we just expect) every time we bite into fried foods—whether that's a chicken nugget from KFC, a piece of tempura shrimp at a Japanese restaurant, or our beloved cutlet. The concept of frying has undergone a profound change over the centuries and everything that we taste today is the result of a long series of experiments.

A doctor who was set on becoming the head physician at the Ospedale Maggiore in Milan had the same worry about privacy; he had just sent a cookbook called *La cucina degli stomachi deboli* ("Cuisine for Weak Stomachs") to press.[7] We're in 1857 and the author is Angelo Dubini, a well-known Milanese dermatologist who at that time was an active researcher with a number of scientific publications to his

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[4] (Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin), *Physiologie du gout, ou méditations de gastronomie transcendante*, Chez Sautelet et C., Paris 1825.

[5] Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *Fisiologia del gusto ovvero meditazioni di gastronomia trascendente*, Rizzoli, Milano 1955 (1st edition, Paris 1825), p. 115.

[6] Ivi, p. 115

[7] Angelo Dubini, *La cucina per gli stomachi deboli*, Tipi di Giuseppe Bernardoni di Gio., Milan 1857 (1858).

credit, as well as the discovery of the intestinal parasite that he named *Ancylostoma duodenale*. In his position of a respected doctor, he was exposed to the critiques of his collegues, given that he was working on a subject that was worthy of his academic profile. Nonetheless, he decided to publish his cookbook, but anonymously: the fact that he was the author was revealed only years later.[8]

The book is full of useful recommendations for those who wanted to avoid "all those dishes that are sumptuous and extravagant, those that require days of preparation, those that have substances that are indigestible and therefore harmful one's health." Despite the objectives expressed on the title page, the book is full of fried foods: fried meat, fish, vegetables, and even certain specialties that were famous at that time, like *mondeghili*, a boiled Milanese meatball.

Clearly the stigma of unhealthiness and heaviness of fried foods was yet to be theorized by the dieticians of the day; even family doctors didn't hesitate to include them with other foods. All it takes is a look at the recommendations to find them listed quite regularly.

Even Pellegrino Artusi—a person notoriously afflicted with digestive difficulties—saved an appendix in his book for recommendations on how to eat light, giving that section the same name as Dubini had given his book.[9] Here again are a whole slew of fried foods: brain, liver, chicken, balls made of rice, stuffed cutlets, and all kinds of things. The shift in how we view fried foods is quite recent and today's demonization have made them a much-desired object, as well as a guilty pleasure, but one to eat with restraint (and behind the backs of dieticians).

Medieval Theories about Fried Foods

Since the Middle Ages, thinkers have taken an interest in frying and how to locate it within theories about dietetics. At that time, medicine was still based on theories formulated by Hippocrates in the fourth century B.C.E., then refined by Galen in the first century C.E. These theories were based on the conviction that the whole perceivable universe was based on four fundamental elements: air, water, earth, and fire. Mixing these vital principles together gave rise to four "humors" (liquids): wet, dry, hot, and cold. According to this medical theory (only rejected in the Enlightenment), people's illnesses were supposed to be caused by an imbalance of these humors. It was a condition that could prevented (or cured) by diet and medicine, two fields that were complementary and intertwined.

Even foods were supposed to have had their own characteristics and prevalent humors. The kinds were supposedly determined by a logic that worked from evidence: if fish were cold and wet, game was hot, while poultry had more "balanced" meat. By choosing the most appropriate method of cooking as well as garnishing with the right condiments, it was possible to correct potential flaws which otherwise would have put one's health in danger. While today we talk about a balanced diet and assume that that's eating the right amounts of vegetables or carbohydrates and limiting fat intake, at that time doctors recommended different cooking depending on the nature of the food: for example, veal was better eaten cooked in wine and garnished with garlic and spices to annul the supposed humoral imbalances.[10]

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[8] Dubini's colleague, Paolo Mantegazza, ultimately revealed that Dubini had written it.

[9] Alberto Capatti, *Pellegrino Artusi. Il fantasma della cucina italiana*, Mondadori, Milan 2019.

[10] Michele Savonarola, *Libreto de lo Exelllentissimo physico Maistro Michele Savonarola: de tutte le cose che se manzano comunamente*, no place of publication given, 1515 (but actually written around 1452), c.30 r.

As methods of cooking went, frying was considered a compromise between roasting and boiling in water. Its status could be deduced from the fact that the fat was liquid (hence wet), but also because it reached much higher temperatures than water. Fried foods had characteristics like those of roasts, whereas stews were closer to foods that were boiled. [11]

According to the doctor Michele Savonarola (author of a treatise on the nature of foods written in the mid-1400s), meat that was fried in fat was not exactly a panacea: "It's nauseating and goes down only after a delay into one's stomach," but was very healthy and was easier to digest than foods cooked on the coals, and anything fried in oil was even more digestible.[12]

In general, the clear preference of cooking techniques was boiling; indeed, parboiling first was often recommended, before cooking them thereafter in some other way, after which the food went into a pot with broth and other liquids, followed by frying and grilling. These preferences put frying in a sort of liminal zone, without a true identity—a sort of purgatory in between the two extremes of fire and water.

Curiously, this philosophical placement was mirrored for centuries by the grammar of table service, in which the first things served were broths and boiled meat, then fried foods in the middle (the so-called *rilievi* or *tramezzi*), and finally all things roasted.[13]

One, ten, a hundred fried foods

One of the greatest anthropologists of the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss, weighed in on this in his essay, "A Short Treatise on Culinary Anthropology", in which he tried to give a hierarchy of cooking methods starting with examples from anthropology and ethnography.

> Boiled foods belong to what we could call an "endo-cuisine" made for domestic use and destined for small, restricted groups […] conversely, roasted foods belong to the "exo-cuisine", that which is served to outsiders. In ancient France, the boiled hen was for the family dinner and roasted meat for the banquet, of which it was the culmination.[14]

[11] Ugo Benzo, *Regole della sanità*, Per gli eredi di Gio. Domenico Tarino, Turin 1620, p. 213. Ugo Benzi (1376-1439) was an Italian philosopher and a professor of Medicine in Pavia, Bologna, Florence, and Padua. This treatise was probably actually written by Benedetto Reguardati (1398-1469), despite the fact that all the work's later editors attributed it to Ugo Benzo.

[12] Michele Savonarola, *Libreto de lo Exelllentissimo physico Maistro Michele Savonarola: de tutte le cose che se manzano comunamente*, s.l., 1515 (1452), c. 37 v. Michele Savonarola taught medicine in Padua and Ferrara and was the grandfather of the Dominican monk, Girolamo Savonarola.

[13] For the order of courses, see Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari, *La cucina italiana. Storia di una cultura*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 199, pp, 149-160.

[14] Originally published in French in 1968, the treatise appears in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners: Mythologiques*, Volume 3, translated by Jonathan Cape, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990.

In this example as well, in the description of the connections and the boundaries between the boiled and the roasted, frying is in an unclear position; it's an add-on for which the anthropologist can't quite find a place.[15]

More recently, the semiologist Gianfranco Marrone has reflected on the identity of frying, starting from Brillat-Savarin (whom we met before). Whereas boiling foods in water leads to their opening, destruction, mixing, and expansion, frying has the opposite effect.

> The object placed in the pan is attacked by the ardent liquid therein, and in this way is rather brusquely deprived of its visual configuration. But this surprising moment is only the catastrophic threshold beyond which it will emerge furnished with golden armor that will protect it from further transformations. If the flame is left high, the object will be carbonized; but if the flame is kept low, the object's juice-values will be concentrated, "intensifying its flavor." In the end, therefore, the Object gets the Values that it already had back, but "heightened", or rather (evidently), bolstered, ready to be given to the guest at hand who—noting the appearance above and beyond the taste—will know how to appreciate its quality.[16]

The contrast between the soft inside and the crunchy outside is one of the fundamental parts of the transformational process and it marks the achievement of the goal. It's not only reaching the historic end of the internal change that takes the exterior from soft to stable and dry, but also the degree of perfection that we tend to look for every time we fry something. The flavor of the main ingredient, closed off and cooked at a high temperature in its own juices, concentrates the taste in a way that other methods of cooking can't match.

Above and beyond the ingredients used or the kind of cooking, the true sign of successful frying is that distinct contrast between crunchy exterior and juicy interior. If we don't achieve this texture, what we have is something else—or, even worse, a fry job gone awry.

There aren't many other techniques in the kitchen with which you can get this effect; that means that whether you're using a deep fry or the air fryer, the important thing is the final result. To get there, a number of different factors need to be considered, among them the typology of the exterior covering and the temperature of cooking. Not all batters lead to a crunchy sheath—for many, that's not even the goal—and all your efforts are for naught if there's not a sufficient thermal shock.

Total immersion in a large quantity of boiling fat, held at a constant temperature, is the best way to guarantee that result. That means that the mortal enemies of frying are the fat used for frying, as well as the smell that spreads out through your house every time you fry—which means that fried foods are something you eat out, at a restaurant or as street food.

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[15] Lévi-Strauss hypothesized an extension of the "raw-smoked-boiled" in the fried foods category and other authors have tried to come up with a more complex structure, like the tetrahedron in Salvatore D'Onofrio, *A banchetto con i morti*, in Salvatore D'Onofrio, *Le parentele spirituali: Europa e orizzonte cristiano*, Edizioni Museo Pasqualino, Palermo 2017, pp. 141-161.

[16] Gianfranco Marrone, *Semiotica del gusto. Linguaggi della cucina, del cibo, della tavola*, Mimesis, Milan 2016, p. 158.

[17] For a semiotic analysis of Sicilian fried foods, see: Emiliano Battistini, Marco Mondino and Davide Puca, *Le forme del fritto*, in *Forme della cucina siciliana. Esercizi di semiotica del gusto*, Meltemi, Sesto San Giovanni (Milan) 2020, pp. 371-391.

You could say that, like sweet dishes, fried foods have slipped ever further towards the margins of the meal: fried foods at the beginning (as appetizers) and then dessert at the end. In both cases, the two specialties have found another place outside of the home, as a snack and as street food.

There are tons of examples from Italy: the *cuoppo*, a little cone of fried foods, from Naples, the stuffed olives from Ascoli, breaded and fried; Bologna's fried tortellini; and fried chicken bits. These types of street food have become symbols of their cities, like Palermo and its markets.[17] Thanks to the dry, easily-managed surface, little fried bits of food are perfect for eating on the go, ready to be plucked up by your fingers. It's a pleasant experience, little bites that are already bite-sized, so no need for silverware to eat up.

Once upon a time, at least in well-off families of aristocrats and the upper middle class, frying meat, fish, and vegetables was pretty common. Progress—which has decreased the number of servants and made cooking spaces smaller, has made it hard to fry easily. Add to that the understandable worries about one's health in a world that is chronically over-nourished. At the same time, technology has given us some gadgets for frying at home, like the deep fryer and (more recently) the air fryer. It does not seem to have reversed the long-term trend: we fry less and less often. There are still restaurants that fry, but even there they have to have a special frying zone, and sometimes they get rid of those for other, easier methods of cooking.

The Cutlet Exception

As with all rules, there's an exception even for frying—and that's where this book comes in. For meals at home there are a few important fried foods that are still around and that maintain their position as relevant to the meal. Two come to mind: fried fish and the cutlet. There's one small difference between the two: while fish can be broken up and fried and served in small portions, it's impossible to do the same for a cutlet. Excluding a sandwich, which can hold basically anything—which means, logically, that it could contain a cutlet, too, making it into something you can eat on your feet—a breaded and fried steak has its own stable physical size which means that it is its own course. Together with other specialties with which it shares its principal characteristics (like cutlets of eggplant, chicken, and other things), it's part of a separate category from little fried pieces of food. That means it has a rather unique place in the culinary panoply.

But as we'll discover in the following chapters, even this identity was one that was acquired over time—it's not some sort of inherent characteristic of the cutlet. It's easy to say "cutlet", but what exactly are we talking about? All of us have in our heads a sort of "ideal cutlet" and yet it's obvious that there can't be just one. One way to start our journey through the parallel universes of "cutlet-ness" could be to try to describe some of its fundamental characteristics, above and beyond just being fried. It's important that we're clear right from the start because in the course of the investigation we're about to undertake, we'll run into a number of gastronomic objects that are cutlet-adjacent—and it won't always be clear how to classify them.

Historically speaking, the cutlet's main features don't all show up together, nor do they arrive at the same time; older cuisines were populated by a myriad of proto-cutlets that had some things in common with the modern one, but they were all still far from the modern standard. Obviously this tension with the "perfect cutlet" as we know it now is just a historical reconstruction that we can do after-the-fact, because

[17] For a semiotic analysis of Sicilian fried foods, see: Emiliano Battistini, Marco Mondino and Davide Puca, *Le forme del fritto*, in *Forme della cucina siciliana. Esercizi di semiotica del gusto*, Meltemi, Sesto San Giovanni (Milan) 2020, pp. 371-391.

no one in the past in all those different eras had any idea what direction the culinary future would take. It's a bit like looking at the human evolutionary tree and all its branching, starting with our ancient ancestors who were related to chimpanzees and bonobos. There was no predestination at all: *Homo sapiens* is nothing more than a primate success story. With the cutlet it's more or less the same thing.

Each of us is free to expand or reduce the criteria we think necessary for a cutlet according to our own personal experience, but we have to start somewhere. Let's forget for a moment the anatomical slice with which we get the classic cutlet, the part of the loin marked by the presence of ribs, the part located in the back quarter of the animal where we find the dorsal and lumbar vertebrae. You can cook that cut in a number of different ways, not all of which use breading and frying. That means that starting with anatomy or the type of animal from which we get it could create confusion.

To start out, we could say that in this field, size counts. There are or at least there have been gastronomic objects that shared characteristics with the modern cutlet; that is, they had a crispy external covering made with egg and breadcrumbs, but with cuts of meat that were quite large and had to be cut into portions for each of the diners. That means that if I take a whole chicken, dunk it in egg and breadcrumbs and fry it, it would be hard to say that the result would be a cutlet—but if we just used part of the breast, we'd have a cutlet without a doubt. A cutlet then is already reduced to the right size and can be put on a plate as a single portion, without needing any further division. That's not a given, as we'll see, especially in the period in which cutlets appeared for the first time.

Another fundamental characteristic is that the cutlet has to be covered with an external layer of egg and breadcrumbs that transforms into a crunchy sheath during cooking. There are many different ways to fry foods and the cutlet is defined by this particular one, normally made from egg and breadcrumbs—sometimes with herbs—applied in several waves. Probably this, together with the method of cooking, is the feature that most captures what a cutlet is. The perfecting of that technique has taken a number of centuries and there are hundreds of recipes that use different methods that don't lead to that result. To distinguish between the two things, in this book I'll use the names that I've found in very old recipe book: we'll call the layer of beaten egg (or sometimes just the yolks) the *indoratura*: that word is usually translated as "embellishment" but it literally means "goldening". For the dredging in breadcrumbs, we'll use the *panatura* ("breading"). Today we tend to refer to both of the steps using the second term, but for centuries that was anything but a given.

There's also a third way, the immersion of the food in a batter that completely covers it and protects it before its cooking at high temperatures (and which leads to the same result). Aside from a few particular exceptions, a homogeneous batter can help avoid the meat's juices from escaping, but usually it doesn't result in the classic external crunchiness that you can only get with that breadcrumb coating (in all of its variations, like Japanese panko).

The cooking method, as we were saying, is just as important: as we've noted since the beginning of the chapter, a cutlet is fried. There's no need for prolixity here: only the immersion in boiling oil (or direct contact by one side at a time) assures the desired effect, even if it's possible with modern methods like the air fryer to get the same outcome. Even in this case there are numerous specialties from long ago that have the name cutlet, even if they're cooked in a pan, on the grill, or on a skewer. Some of these are still around today, like the cutlet *alla palermitana* (i.e., how they make it in the Sicilian city of Palermo).

We've arrived at the most problematic aspect: the cut of meat. The cutlet—which is derived from the French word *côtelette*, a diminutive form of the word for "rib"—is from a cut near the ribs of an animal. But

if we think of what this cut of meat has without considering all the characteristics we've already laid out, we're wrong. The fact that this specialty gets its name from a specific anatomical piece can lead us astray, especially when we take into consideration historical sources that talk about many different dishes as cutlets, but ones that are neither breaded nor fried.

In some cases, this correspondence is still valid, as in the case of the *cotoletta alla milanese* (the Milanese cutlet), but for the cutlet in general it's not a rule that the meat is that cut. During its culinary evolution, the term "cutlet" has undergone some semantic slippage that's taken it from its original anatomical designation towards a specific cooking technique. That's why it's common today to speak of a chicken cutlet or an eggplant cutlet, without any misunderstandings. But (as we'll see) it's a trend that's been around for quite a while.

It's possible that there will be some confusion in trying to delineate the difference of a cutlet from a *fettina panata* (a "breaded slice [of meat]"), something that has many of the characteristics listed above and yet comes from the whole spectrum of steaks not made from the loin. Without getting too long-winded here, we can say that the differences between the two typologies—as far as the actual cut and the preparation are concerned—are in reality quite minimal from a historical perspective. Indeed, the differentiation between the two is quite recent: it's from an attempt to highlight the cutlet as belonging to Milanese cuisine, whereas the *fettina panata* as having origins in the area around Rome.

Even though the *fettina panata* could have a more general meaning, in everyday Italian that barely registers (with the exception of central Italy). The tendency today is to specify the cutlet with another noun: fish cutlet, chicken cutlet, zucchini cutlet, and so on. Only purists shudder when confronted by these names: in much of the world, any cut of meat (and not just meat) that's breaded and fried is called *milanese*. That's to highlight the origins, something like what happened with the name Bologna, which substitutes for the word *mortadella* abroad (e.g., baloney).

That means we won't be so fixated on not mixing up the cutlet and the *fettina panata* in our analysis; rather, we'll concentrate on the characteristics that make a cutlet a cutlet: frying, a single portion, and the browning. From here on out they'll be our Cartesian axes on our journey.