

The Food Taster by Peter Elbling.
Atlantic Books 2005.

The Food Taster is a novel that grabs the reader's interest instantaneously and never lets up over nearly 300 pages. Set in Italy in the sixteenth century it tells the tale of a man of humble stock who becomes, by accident rather than design, food taster to the Duke of Corsoli, a barbaric monster in whose employ everyone lives on a knife edge.

Ugo Difonte has a daughter, Miranda, whom he loves above all else, and when he is not striving to protect himself all his energies are devoted to her. How he survives at Duke Federico's court, and indeed how he prospers, is the meat of the story, one which is replete with mouth-watering details of medieval dishes and wines. So vivid is Elbling's writing that you can almost smell the aroma of some of the dishes prepared for the Duke and his friends, and you can also smell the fear that he engenders among those who are wholly at his mercy.

Ugo's life is a struggle, but it is replete with incident, and the reader comes to care about him, respect his quick wit and eye for the main chance, and hope that in the final scene he skips free from his toil.

To discover how he does so and indeed whether he does so, you will have to read the book! And I suspect you will love every escapist page of it.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh