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# Fascist foodways: *Ricettari* as propaganda for grain production and sexual reproduction

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## ABSTRACT

Food connects people and land, a link that the Italian Fascist regime exploited through their seizure of local culinary culture for the promotion of national demographic goals. This article traces the connections between the regime's concurrent drives for food production and sexual reproduction. It will show the propagandistic potential of recipes, and also the limits of top-down dietary change under dictatorship. *Ricettari*, propagandistic recipe pamphlets, blended public politics and private practices into a heady cocktail, one that cast autarkic cookery and sexual reproduction as valuable contributions to the Fascist state. These documents establish a clear link between the regime's demographic policy and the autarkic campaigns in favor of Italian grain production. Cooking, the professed subject of *ricettari*, conveyed political neutrality—it falsely marked the documents as feminine and innocuous. So too did design: small and light, these stapled leaflets could be easily rolled up and stuck in an apron pocket. Portability thus insured that these documents could cross the threshold from the public rally to the private kitchen. Once there, they could directly address women, and attempt to modify their daily habits in ways that would change the body from the inside out. At stake in the *ricettari* lies a broader contribution to Food Studies in terms of food and politics: this unique form of ephemera reveals that the Italian Fascist regime took a pro-natalist approach to cuisine.

## KEYWORDS

Fascism; cookbook; nationalism; recipe; propaganda; gender; Italy

## Introduction

Food connects people and land, a link that the Italian Fascist regime exploited through their seizure of local culinary culture for the promotion of national demographic goals. This article traces the connections between the regime's concurrent drives for food production and sexual reproduction. It will show the propagandistic potential of recipes, and also the limits of top-down dietary change under dictatorship. Scholars of Italian Fascism have examined politics of food both on a grand scale and through detailed case studies (Helstosky 2004a; Parasecoli 2014; Dickie 2008; Scarpellini

2008; Counihan 2004). This study builds on the previous work of these noted scholars. To do so, it examines National Rice Board (Ente Nazionale Risi) actions in light of the autarkic policies favoring the promotion of Italian-grown rice, especially in the Southern Italy where *risotto* was regarded as having little flavor or nutritional value. In other words, it aims to establish a clear link between the regime's demographic policy and the autarkic campaigns in favor of Italian grain production. Here I posit a question: can we speak of recipes as corollaries to a state's politics? In other words, is there a Fascist approach to cuisine?

To answer this question, this article investigates culinary ephemera as Fascist propaganda. Specifically, it examines *ricettari*, recipe pamphlets, to understand their contribution to dictatorial politics. Because widespread illiteracy precluded many readers from fully grasping written content, arresting visuals accompanied and explained the text. In these documents, watercolor images, black and white photos, scientific graphs, expert testimony, and recipes blended public politics and private practices into a heady cocktail, one that cast autarkic cooking as women's version of war. In line with recent work on Fascist femininity (Chang 2014), this article centers its study of gendered food propaganda within the Fascist body project.

These close readings of *ricettari* follow a narrative trajectory, moving from the body's exterior appearance to its interior cycles. The arc provides detailed sensory evidence—taste, look, touch—attesting to the broader phenomenon of cookery for female fertility and male virility. Promoting health through Italian ingredients promised to increase the fecundity of the current generation. Women would birth more mothers and soldiers to fight the battles of the future. *Ricettari* reveal the relationship between two forms of domestic production—alimentary autarky and sexual reproduction—to be enmeshed under this Fascist state system.

I argue that the regime deployed *ricettari* toward three ends: economic (to promote autarky by increasing consumption of local ingredients), symbolic (to forge political cohesion by fusing disparate regions through national cuisine), and eugenic (to strengthen the body politic by favoring nutrition over flavor) (Adema 2007; Appadurai 1988). At stake in the *ricettari* lies a broader contribution to Food Studies in terms of food and politics: this intriguing form of ephemera reveals that the Fascist regime took a pronatalist approach to cuisine.

### ***How to interpret ricettari***

Cooking, the professed subject of *ricettari*, conveyed political neutrality—it falsely marked the documents as feminine and innocuous. So too did

design: small and light, these stapled leaflets could be easily rolled up and stuck in an apron pocket. Portability thus insured that these documents could cross the threshold from the public rally to the private kitchen. Once there, they could directly address women, and attempt to modify their daily habits in ways that would change the body from the inside out.

*Ricettari*, like cookbooks, appeared to promise change in daily behavior because recipes rely on procedural discourse, that is, on a series of commands. Linguist Tim Wharton's application of the term "procedural discourse" to 21<sup>st</sup>-century American, British, and French recipes informs this analysis (Wharton 2010). Cookbook content must be convincing, credible, and offer a reward. Anthropologist Jack Goody nods to this idea in his discussion of ancient and modern shopping lists, menus, and recipes when he notes that cookbooks consistently function as representations not only of structures of production and distribution, but also of class and hierarchy (Goody 1997 also see Notaker 2017). Combining Wharton's linguistic parsing of recipe text with Jack Goody's concern for social power as a structuring element in cookbooks reveals how *ricettari* promote a general political policy through specific culinary practices. Imperative-driven formats could prescribe culinary changes, like eating more rice and less pasta.

In its approach to *ricettari* as material culture, this article also relies on Robin Bernstein's methodology of "scriptive things" (Bernstein 2011). That is, it approaches the *ricettari* as texts that encourage, but do not dictate, meaningful bodily behaviors, in this case cooking actions like kneading bread and chopping onions. This set of cooking prompts does not reveal a performance. Rather, it reveals a script for a performance. That script, the recipe, stands as a historical artifact. Rarely do scholars endeavor to involve all five senses in their reconstruction of women's history, perhaps due to the difficulty in sourcing such materials. By studying the *ricettari*, we can produce new knowledge about women's lives under Italian Fascism.

Today *ricettari* are rare. Two factors shaped archival practice and reduced *ricettari* preservation: ephemerality and political taboo. First, the physical properties of *ricettari* suggested that the pamphlets were disposable. Through kitchen use during the Fascist period, *ricettari* disintegrated into oily paper scraps destined for the rubbish bin. Second, contemporary political norms that approach Fascist-period objects and ephemera with dread. What if a scrapbook discovery reveals a beloved grandparent's support for the dictatorship? In Italy, used cookbooks and culinary ephemera from this problematic historical period occasionally resurfaces only to be discarded as soon as they are found. Even if they do not provoke familial embarrassment thanks to the unpopular politics they contain, *ricettari* may still be discarded because they do not appear financially valuable or historically significant. Major sites like Archivio Centrale dello Stato and the

Biblioteche Nazionali house the government records and correspondence that were archived during the Fascist rule. Because the regime preferred to preserve these more traditional records, *ricettari* can be difficult to find in Italian institutions.<sup>1</sup>

The Wolfsonian-FIU's Fascist ephemera collection provides the *ricettari* examined in the following close readings. The Wolfsonian collection is the largest of its kind, comprising forty-six *ricettari*. Provenance records indicate that these *ricettari* came to this museum through benevolent neglect. They did not survive because someone intended to save them but rather because someone forgot to throw them away. Comprehensive analysis would be impossible due to scarcity, yet the high quality of the collection provides the opportunity for in-depth analysis. Researchers can turn each page of the *ricettari*—none are missing—for cover-to-cover analysis of each pamphlet. This collection fuses the binary associations of home and homeland, public and private, and body and body politic. It is this fusion that characterizes the *ricettari* as propaganda.

### ***Pronatalism in cookery: Feeding mothers to reform future children***

The Fascist regime set an explicit precedent for the *ricettari*'s pronatalist cookery in their approach to parallel arenas of food aid for working-class women. For example, soup kitchens at obstetric clinics provided opportunities to cross-promote regime-approved foods to poorer segments of the public that had no financial alternative but to eat what was provided. The Board for the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood (Opera Nazionale per la Protezione della Maternità e Infanzia) carefully designed meal plans according to nutritional studies conducted by the Fascist regime, soup kitchen menus largely eliminated plants from the Liliaceae family, like garlic, onions, asparagus, as well as some Brassicaceae, like cauliflower and broccoli. These vegetables were believed to diminish the flow of breastmilk, and to give it a sour or bitter flavor that infants did not enjoy. Good-tasting breastmilk enticed the infant to eat more, making them stronger. Dense, solid foods and loose, liquid porridges were added to or subtracted from individual mother's diets to thicken or thin their breastmilk consistency. Mothers' diets thus controlled the quality and quantity of breastmilk available for their infants.

Soup kitchen menus provide a window into the more subtle promotion of pronatalism in *ricettari*. In both cases, food served a prophylactic purpose. Feeding mothers translated to feeding infants, the future of the race. By providing these standardized eating spaces and preparations, these government-affiliated boards created new, Fascist-approved national culture through food. At the same time, popular responses to this form of

propaganda demonstrate just how contentious the Fascist governments' claims could be. Fascist foodways acted through the bodies of the current generation so as to physically reform the next.

Manipulating culinary culture could fortify the future body politic. Scholars of Fascist Italian demography have observed that the regime focused eugenic interventions to improve the race on the inside of reproductive bodies, specifically to the stomach or womb (Ipsen 1996; Horn 1994). *Ricettari* and related culinary propaganda reveal an additional resonance in eugenic thinking that aims at the stomach to reform Italian bodily contours and rhythms. Digestion, not childbirth, in this case provides the means toward biopolitical change. Fascism exploited the fact that bodies are constructed through the absorption of food. Specifically, they used local grains to refine the national body, both inside (making them more fertile and virile) and out (making them larger and more muscular). These ideas were not exclusive to Fascist states, of course. Many early twentieth century industrial states entertained eugenic thinking and attempted to regulate private cooking habits, but Italy's totalitarian regime treated these ideas differently in their synthesis, construction, and ambition.

### ***Autarkic grains in the fascist economy***

Benito Mussolini inaugurated two, key culinary “battles,” both multi-year campaigns that aimed to change how Italians ate. First came the Battle for Grain, launched in June 1925. This 10-year operation primarily aimed to decrease consumption of bread and pasta and secondarily to increase consumption of grains other than wheat. In place of these wheat-based staples, the regime encouraged Italians to use cornmeal and oatmeal as substitutes. Because many Italians considered raw corn and oats be animal foods, not human foods, the regime carefully chose one grain to emphasize: yes, these grains would help, but they would focus on rice.

Unlike wheat, rice grew plentifully in fields across Northern and Central Italy. It was, in a word, autarkic. Autarky meant economic self-sufficiency. Boosting domestic production of autarkic foods promised independence from foreign imports. To promote rice as a replacement for pasta in propaganda, the regime established the National Rice Board in January 1928, and the National Day for Rice Propaganda one month later. Over the course of the 1930s, autarky increasingly served as a means to protect the Italian fascist regime's imperial ambitions. The 1935 Invasion of Ethiopia and ensuing League of Nations sanctions reemphasized this need. In 1938, Edmondo Rossoni, head of the Fascist syndicates between 1922 and 1925, further developed autarky as a form of corporativism in the widely republished directive to Italian industry, “The Autarkic Mentality and the New

Fascist Order.” Because autarky centered the productive drive on Italian industry and farming throughout the fascist *ventennio*, scholars have noted the prevalence of autarkic foods in the Italian interwar diet. But only Carol Helstosky has delved into the cultural meaning autarky to Italian interwar cookery, which she has defined as “alimentary sovereignty” (Helstosky 2004a). Her definition connects with studies of home cooking and interwar food commercial culture across parallel geographic contexts (United States: Bentley 1998; Veit 2013; Great Britain: Nazi Germany: Reagin 2006).

Autarky translated financial sovereignty into political autonomy. In a loop of tautological reasoning, this policy served as both the end and the means for unilateral action and Italian conquest in the greater Mediterranean. To increase domestic production, Italy first needed to augment its domestic territory—by claiming the *quarta sponda*, the so-called “fourth shore” of Italy in Italian East Africa. Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in September 1935, establishing the Italian Empire in East Africa. In October, the League of Nations countered with a raft of economic sanctions against Italy, curtailing trade with key partners such as Turkey, from whom Italy received the majority of its grain. To stay afloat, the regime shifted its focus from expanding the boundaries of the domestic to increasing the capacity of production, formulating policies to rationalize and modernize Italian industry so as to attain economic self-sufficiency and imperviousness to the economic isolation threatened by war. Alimentary autarky, the consumption of domestic foods, promised to solve this problem with rice.

*Ricettari* attempted to bring northern and central Italian foods into southern kitchens in hopes of balancing Italy’s wheat deficit by increasing consumption of domestic grains, especially rice. Government groups and private companies produced strikingly similar *ricettari*. At first glance, it might seem as though the Fascist government applied pressure to the food industry to repeat their messaging. But in fact, no such top-down communication was necessary. Companies voluntarily mimicked the government line because Fascist food policies ultimately benefited their bottom line. Because Fascist economics were corporatist in nature, private food companies stood to profit from state promotion of Italian-grown products. Economist Germà Bel has argued that privatization was forged in the crucible of corporatism under the Fascist regime, ultimately yielding “the earliest case of large-scale privatization in a capitalist economy” (Bel 2011).

Wealthy industrialists tended to support the regime, and in turn, autarkic policy increased government revenue through privatization. They followed the government’s lead in public communications, both in terms of style and content. To provide a specific example, the Centauro oatmeal company mimicked the regime’s culinary propaganda to sell their product using



simplified recipes from the central Italian region of Marche to promote oats to consumers in Calabria. Although Italian oats grow across both Central and Southern Italy, the cultivars differ: Central Italian oats are harvested for grain, but Southern Italian oats are for pasture and forage. This agricultural divide helps to explain why Southern Italians resisted oats: their local varieties served as animal fodder (Baldanzi 1996). But the regional commonalities of central Italian cookery that bound northern and southern Italian foodways allowed Centauro an opening to introduce new foods and preparations to the heel of the Italian boot, where oats featured in few traditional recipes. Because private food and especially cereal companies like Centauro, Dahò, and Maizena, benefited from the regime's food policies, they jumped on the autarkic bandwagon in their advertising in hopes of convincing consumers to think of oatmeal as a suitable grain for human consumption.

The voluntary politicization by private food companies was not new, nor were the Fascist regime's bids to reconfigure everyday habits to support state policies. What was new, however, was the attempt to apply dictatorial style in recipes, systematically connecting working-class women's practice of autarky in Mezzogiorno kitchens with the broader political projects of the Italian north. Italian Fascism's food policy projects spanned the northern food supply chain from rural Lombardian rice paddies to urban Marchegiana food packaging plants. Traveling through targeted distribution channels, *ricettari* could then promote politically charged product consumption directly to demographic groups that lacked political and economic power.

### ***All aboard the rice train: The politics of ricettari distribution***

Designed and produced chiefly by male designers in urban centers such as Milan and Genoa, the *ricettari* then began their southward journey, moving from the Mezzogiorno aboard dedicated food transport.<sup>2</sup> Luce newsreels show volunteers from the *Fasciste Femminili* handing out *ricettari* to female crowds at various political events. For instance, one series of six newsreels from 1931 to 1935 focused on the Rice Train.<sup>3</sup> The Rice Train provided culinary propaganda in motion: it carried rice and *ricettari* from northern rice fields to southern consumers. At triumphal stops in Rome and Bari, we see a pan shot of the *Fasciste Femminili* leaning out of the train to deliver handful-sized samples of rice into the outstretched hands, followed by a close-up of the rice *ricettario* cover designed by Gino Boccasile. As an added bonus for the regime, the rice trains implicitly promoted concurrent Fascist nation-building projects from transport to tourism, interlinking their ultimate success. Government volunteers and advertisers distributed



these disposable cookbooks along with rice and oatmeal samples at *feste*, rallies, and Fascist ceremonies, blending hunger relief with propaganda.

This trajectory also demonstrates that region marked *ricettari* for use by a specific subset of the Italian population: rural southern women, generally known as *massaie*. The term originally evoked a specific image: a married, working-class woman with conservative values, living in a rural location with her large family. However, Mussolini and the regime often used this term to address all Italian women, perhaps in hopes that addressing them as *massaie* would push the masses to adopt these social and physical qualities. The Fascist regime used the term to impose, rather than to describe, demographic categories.

### ***Dictating dinner with recipe instructions***

In the context of Italian *ricettari*, the regulatory language of the cooking instructions evokes the power differential between the Northern, urban, upper-class, male producers of these documents and their Southern, rural, working-class, female users. Recipes uniformly addressed readers with impersonal, collective orders in the Fascist *voi* form, rather than the formal *Lei* or the inclusive *noi* commonly found in recipe pamphlets and cookbooks during this period. The *ricettario* for Centauro-brand oatmeal, for instance, offers simple instructions meant to teach women basic dishes that required little money, time, or cooking experience to successfully complete. All fifty-one recipes in this *ricettario* consist of seven or less separate cooking actions organized as a list of imperatives, rendering them both short and clear. The recipe for Ground Centauro Oatmeal Balls (*palle d'avena pestata* Centauro) consists of seven directives to mix, cook, slice, add, pour, roll, fry, and serve. This format allows for easy memorization: as the *ricettario* disintegrated through use, the recipe integrated into the mind and muscle memory.

In addition to style, recipe content and structure also served to rework foodways in accordance with political concerns. *Ricettari* integrated novel ingredients into daily culinary life by using temporal cues to anchor new recipes on old cooking habits. They also mobilized some notions of Southern Italian cookery, such as the belief that high temperatures improved grain flavor and texture, to encourage consumption of unfamiliar Northern grains. *Ricettari* often note that dishes should be served “very hot,” a change that reframed northern grains through Southern culinary traditions. Some recipes switched from imperative commands to conditional suggestions, creating the appearance of culinary openness, as in the suggestion to “add some egg white, *if you find it necessary*.” However, these directives should not be misconstrued as invitations to culinary autonomy.

By officially sanctioning the times and places for culinary invention, the *ricettario* inherently classifies itself, and by extension the regime, as the permission-granting authority in private kitchens. Cues like “let soak *during the night*” slotted oatmeal preparation into typical domestic work patterns. In contrast to the personal tone and sensorial detail of American and British interwar recipes, the austere, repetitive dictates of *ricettari* instructions evoke the hypnotic effects of more overt propaganda (Cavallo 1997, 2002; Ventrone 2005). Dictatorial style prompted women to cook new foods without asking why.

Fascist ideology often involved the creation of an idealized national past, coupled with the related myth that only dictatorship could deliver the rebirth of those glories. *Ricettari* translated this political dogma into culinary terms. They rewrote the nation’s culinary past, realigning it in support of the dictatorship. The Fascist state regularly distributed thousands of *ricettari* in the festival context of political rallies and *sagre*, the newly created food festivals that promoted autarkic foods like grapes, oranges, and olive oil, as well as rice (Ferris 2019; Griffith 2019). Unanimous support of wartime cookery on the home front, they suggest, propelled Italy’s past martial victories. Moreover, they framed new autarkic dishes as the heirs of traditional Italian recipes in the attempt to forge a cohesive Fascist Italian cuisine through Northern ingredients and militant narratives.

### ***Oatmeal balls for renaissance warriors***

Centauro’s “Manuale di Cucina” exemplifies these idealized images of battle, wherein Italy’s past glories suggest a future of international dominance. Suffused in golden light, a lance-bearing knight and a nobleman hoisting a red flag to billow in the wind stand behind a box of oatmeal, itself bearing the golden, warlike image of a rearing centaur. Color contrast draws the eye to the slogan, “Strength and health for all.” The triumphal military imagery of this *ricettario* links the cook’s efforts in the kitchen to the nation’s successes on the warfront. Renaissance warfare connects current concerns to past conflicts, recasting the coming conflict as the modern incarnation of a noble, explicitly Italian tradition of combat (Figures 1 and 2).

Heavy-handed juxtaposition of image and text encouraged the cook to connect these concepts herself, internalizing the association. Interior pages of this *ricettario* feature dreary recipes for *gnocchi*, “Centauro mashed oatmeal balls,” and *gnocchetti*—all essentially the same preparation for balls of ground oatmeal, featuring different sizes of the boiled or fried grains. The more economical the recipes featured, the more likely an image of war occupies the facing page. Across from the oatmeal balls recipe we find a

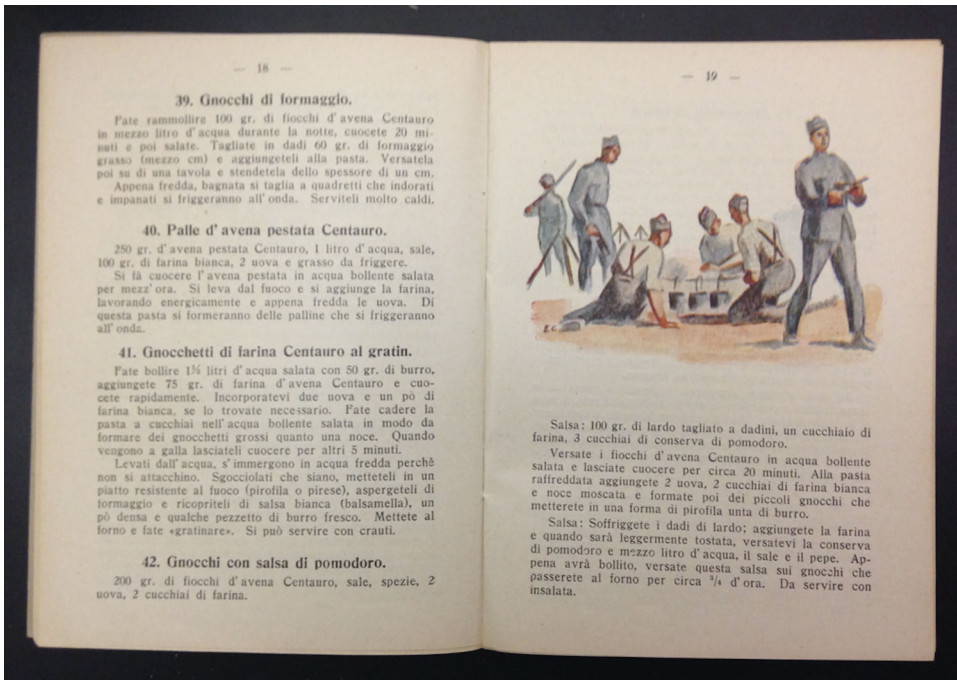


**Figure 1.** Manuale di cucina (Cooking Manual), Ricettario cover, c. 1935, published by Centauro, 6.5 by 5.5 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, ITAL B1992.1817).

watercolor of six young soldiers gathered around three pots on a campfire. One imagines that those three pots contain *gnocchi*, *gnocchetti* and *palle d'avena*. The gray-green of their uniforms recalls the hues of the M1909 tunic, the standard uniform for foot soldiers introduced in World War I.

This visual link to past conflicts underscores the changing meaning of wartime sacrifice for Italy. Whereas World War II brought terrible and enduring food shortages, World War I did not. Though unpopular for its bland flavor and foreignness to local foodways, the Italian government consistently provided rice to Mezzogiorno citizens for hunger relief. Moreover, Allied, and especially British, loans and supplies, meant that many Northern and Central Italians ate better from 1915 to 1918 than prior to the war. Soldiers ate particularly well, enjoying 375 grams of meat per day. World War I allied food policy likely conditioned later Italian responses to the Fascist preparations for food shortages during World War II. With high expectations for full bellies during wartime, many Italians were left hungry and disappointed when food shortages arrived in the late 1930s.

By placing such meager recipes beside an image of the war, the *ricettario* explicitly links the choices made in the private sphere with outcomes in the



**Figure 2.** Manuale di cucina (Cooking Manual), Ricettario recipe pages, c. 1935, published by Centauro as part of the Manuale di Cucina (Cooking Manual) series, 6.5 by 5.5 inches, pp. 18-19 (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, ITAL B1992.1817).

public sphere. This image falls in line with the tendency of propaganda aimed at rural women to avoid images of actual battlefields, focusing instead on moments of comforting commensality. Masculinity and cookery did not often meet in early twentieth century recipe booklets. But Fascist foodways relied on this connection to underscore the pronatalist goal of their autarkic ingredients. Eating these foods would strengthen soldiers, who would win the war and return home to their wives, with whom they would produce the next generation of Fascist fighters.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1930s, democratic and dictatorial governments alike demonstrated a profound concern for how food powered and shaped the body (Cullather 2007). But the Italian Fascist regime went further in its attempt to harness the biopolitical power of food. New knowledge of nutrition connected with concerns for alimentary autarky, as economic self-sufficiency provided diplomatic independence. Food literalizes this idea, with different typologies of strong bodies. The political goals of the *ricettari* thus mark them as a divergent form of propaganda unique to Fascism's attempted control of the insides of homes and people.<sup>5</sup> Giving lie to their name, the recipe text in *ricettari* typically amounted to less than half of the total page count. Graphics, graphs, and testimonials comprised the majority of the pamphlet's pages. The artistic illustrations and scientific

graphs produced by Fascist boards (Ente Nazionale Riso) and the food industry (Dahò, Maizena, Centauro) merged scientific expertise with biopolitical governance.

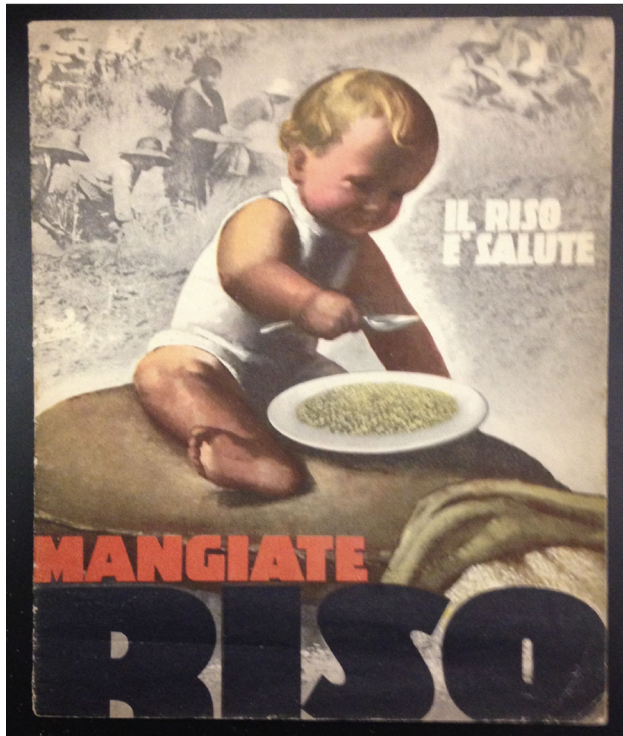
Society was imagined as a body to be defended against threats both external and internal. Examining the body politics of *ricettari* demonstrates how these documents cast infancy and age as forms of sickness to be cured through food. In the words of David Horn, these are “bodies at risk” which can in turn “pose risks to a more encompassing collectivity” (Horn 1994). By pathologizing what had been normal stages of life, these documents elevate mild physical vulnerability to complete biological breakdown (Ipsen 1996). These images illustrate how *ricettari* assigned the disciplining and remaking the future body politic to marginalized citizens so as to promote eugenic cookery. According to the *ricettari*, rice could provide an edible panacea to this social problem by fortifying vulnerable bodies in anticipation of war.

### ***Rice for robust Italians and the meaning of fat under fascism***

Fatness in particular conveyed ideal health. Carol Helstosky has examined how this association pervaded Italian language during the early twentieth century, “Gustatory metaphors applied to happiness and success. A *uomo di panza*, or ‘man with a belly’ was a successful man; a *uomo grasso* or ‘fat man’ was not obese but a man of importance. To ‘swim in lasagna’ or ‘invite someone over for pasta and meat’ also carried connotations of generosity and success” (Helstosky 2004b; Forth and Carden-Coyne 2005). Mussolini himself embodied this quality: stout and muscular, propaganda celebrated his square, neckless profile as a symbol of fortitude. Gino Boccasile’s cover (Figure 3) for the Ente Nazionale Riso *ricettario* exemplifies this association, and sought to connect fatness with the abstract concept of plenty and with the concrete foodstuff of rice. A robust blond baby flops atop an overflowing bag of rice, spooning rice into its mouth from an oversized white plate. The baby’s gender is unclear, as its identifying features are obscured. In effect, this is not a specific baby, but an iconic one. Subjectivity of taste gives way to the apparent objectivity of nutrition’s salubrious effects. Vitamins and minerals act internally to recreate the external appearance of the baby, plumping its cheeks and adding a rosy tint. Rice’s nutrition appeared as a medical fact.

This image evokes the interlinked associations of fatness, plenty, and rice in two ways: first, the infant’s disproportionate size in relation to the women in the background, second, the rice’s exceeding of the bag and plate’s boundaries. The plate suggests that there is plenty of rice to eat today, and the bag assures us that there will be plenty to eat tomorrow.





**Figure 3.** Gino Boccasile, *Mangiate Riso* (Eat Rice) ricettario cover, 1935, published by Ente Nazionale Risi (National Rice Board), 7.5 by 6.5 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, ITAL 2XB1992.1798).

Alongside this image, the text connects these three ideas: next to the baby's face, we see the words "Rice is Health," written in white. Even the font reinforces this theme. The *ricettario*'s titular command, "Eat Rice," swells to absorb the bottom half of the page. Like the baby shown in the center, the thick orange and black letters seem to have fed on the rice, and grown fat as a result of this autarkic nosh.

But the baby is only one of many bodies pictured here. Black and white photographs of *mondine* (female rice harvesters) provide a living backdrop. Rice weeding has traditionally been a form of gendered labor in Italy (Rossini 1936; Brianta 1983; Faita 1995; Zappi 1991). Realism and the use of grayscale place these images within the context of newspapers, newsreels, and documentary photography. Although these media forms suggest ideological neutrality and the pursuit of truth, they typically parroted the party line. Here, including the *mondine* on this *ricettario* casts their agricultural work as a patriotic contribution to the autarky, and to the Fascist cause. Their persistent presence in Ente Nazionale Riso propaganda stems partially from their physicality: the regime connected rurality, ample bodies, and florid faces with fertility, tradition, and social conservatism. They

appeared to epitomize Fascist womanhood. In reality, most of the *mondine* voted Socialist or Communist, and, as evidenced by their persistent strikes, many were overtly hostile to the Fascist regime's economic policies (Cinotto 2011).

Showing the *mondine* here suggests their consent to Fascist policy, and links the women's production of rice to the baby's consumption thereof. Because the *ricettari* draw attention to the importance of nourishing weak bodies, in particular those of young Italians, they also point to importance of the *massaie* not only in production of food, but also in the reproduction of children for the nation. It is the point of the *mondine's* presence: to birth the baby in the foreground and to grow the rice it eats. Decreasing infant mortality constituted the centerpiece of reform, and led to the founding of the Board for the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, known by the Italian acronym ONMI, with its explicit goals of raising domestic birthrates and decreasing infant mortality so as to increase the total number of Italians living in Italy.

The thin body was a danger to the regime, but not all thin bodies threatened the regime in the same way. The fat baby and the florid *mondine* of this *ricettario* provide a visual counter-narrative to two shadow figures that haunted the regime: skinny babies (Whitaker 2003) and the *donna crisi* or "crisis-woman" (Chang 2014). Although they emerged from different circumstances, both threatened the regime by exposing the limits of its war-time food policies. The *donna crisi* suggested the sterile modernity of the urban elite, and the regime's inability to impose its will on the consumptive habits and bodies of young women. Modish women who smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol, and dieted were not thin bodies at risk, but thin bodies that posed risk. Refusal to eat further evoked the refusal to produce infants for the regime's pronatalist projects. Because low body weight precluded fertility, a flat, female stomach signaled the double refusal to participate in Fascist projects of food consumption and infant production. Underweight infants were thin bodies at risk: they evoked the shockingly low daily caloric intake of rural populations and the regime's inability to create a sustainable food program for its working-class citizens. All thin bodies evoked limited food consumption. But the reasons behind their meager diets differed. For infants, their thinness resulted from systemic privation. For the *donna crisi*, their thinness resulted from personal denial. But in both cases, flat bellies showed that Fascist policies for both food and demography had failed to achieve their goals.

Inside the Ente Nazionale Riso *ricettario*, the theme shifts from youth to age: centenarian Duke Borea d'Olma testifies to rice's contribution to his famous longevity. In addition to conveying the authority of inherited class status, the Duke Borea d'Olma's title also calls to mind the ascension of





**Figure 4.** *Mangiate Riso (Eat Rice)* interior page, 1935, published by Ente Nazionale Risi (National Rice Board), 7.5 by 6.5 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, ITAL 2XB1992.1798).

Fascist power in its inevitable association with Mussolini, and his popular moniker *il Duce*. Although both men hailed from Northern Italy, each constituted a national Italian figure. The inclusion of this figure thus suggests that rice might similarly move from being a Northern foodstuff to a national one. The cover photo reads, “He who eats rice lives more than one hundred years.” The phrase recurs above the photograph as well, this time in bold, capital letters, “Advice From the Most Famous Centenarian in the World” (Figure 4).

This figure provides both living proof and expert testimony to support the Ente Nazionale Riso’s defense for rice’s value for consumers. The Duke’s longevity suggests that rice not only fuels the short-term needs of childhood, but those of age as well. Unlike the *mondine* who silently toil on the cover, he looks at and speaks to the reader, issuing direct commands to cook rice for its nutritional value and positive effects on the body. These commands travel the same downward trajectory of power as the *ricettari* themselves, moving from age to (relative) youth, royal to poor, male to female, and North to South. But in an interesting slippage of authority and competence, the *ricettario* uses the Duke’s high social status to convey dietary knowledge. His qualifications for dispensing these recommendations derive from his connections to governing bodies. He has served variously, we are told, as a senator, a prefect, and a Master of Ceremonies at the former royal court. The assumption that a man’s office qualifies him as a nutritional expert also informs the image on the opposite page: a letter

from one senator to another, extolling the virtues of rice for curing what supposedly ailed the working class.

A rice *ricettario* from Alimenti Dahò details the exact nature of those maladies.<sup>6</sup> The back cover proclaims, “Dahò Foods: For Sucklings and Babies, Adults- Convalescent and Sick, Diabetic, Obese, Nephritic, Cardiac, Ulcerative, Gout-Afflicted, etc.”<sup>7</sup> Next to this textual cascade of afflictions sits the company seal, allying the the company’s essence with nourishing the physically weak. Why might a private company like Alimenti Dahò seek to link their foods so strongly with weak bodily states like youth, age, and sickness? This *ricettario*, along with many others, frames food as medicine, prescribing rice as an edible panacea to defend against bodily frailty in hopes of shifting consumer concerns from flavor to nutrition. During Italy’s Fascist period, doctor and recipe columnist Amalia Moretti Foggia (pseudonym Petronilla) applied this idea through curative recipes in her popular cookbooks and recipe pamphlets (Foggia 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944; Dickie 2008; Counihan 2004).<sup>8</sup>

While today many consider *risotto* to be a culinary treat, in Southern Italy in 1930s it was anything but. The rich Northern versions flavored with expensive saffron, parmesan cheese, butter, and meat represent the *risotto* we know today. Cooking technology (electric and gas stoves) and food quality has likewise risen since the Fascist period, raising *risotto*’s culinary status. Advertisers could hardly build the argument for rice on taste during the Fascist period, when Southern *risotto* consisted of unflavored, boiled-down rice. Drawing on nutritional arguments rather than culinary appeals in an effective approach, and helps to explain why this *ricettario* evokes the original meaning of the word recipe: a medical prescription to promote health rather than pleasure. The *ricettari* made a virtue of reality. During the 1930s, most Italians ate autarkically due to economic necessity rather than choice. Although increasing rice consumption was the *ricettari*’s primary goal, they also worked to increase Italians’ satisfaction with their meager diets by casting involuntary deprivation as voluntary patriotism.

### ***Dietary data for culinary consent***

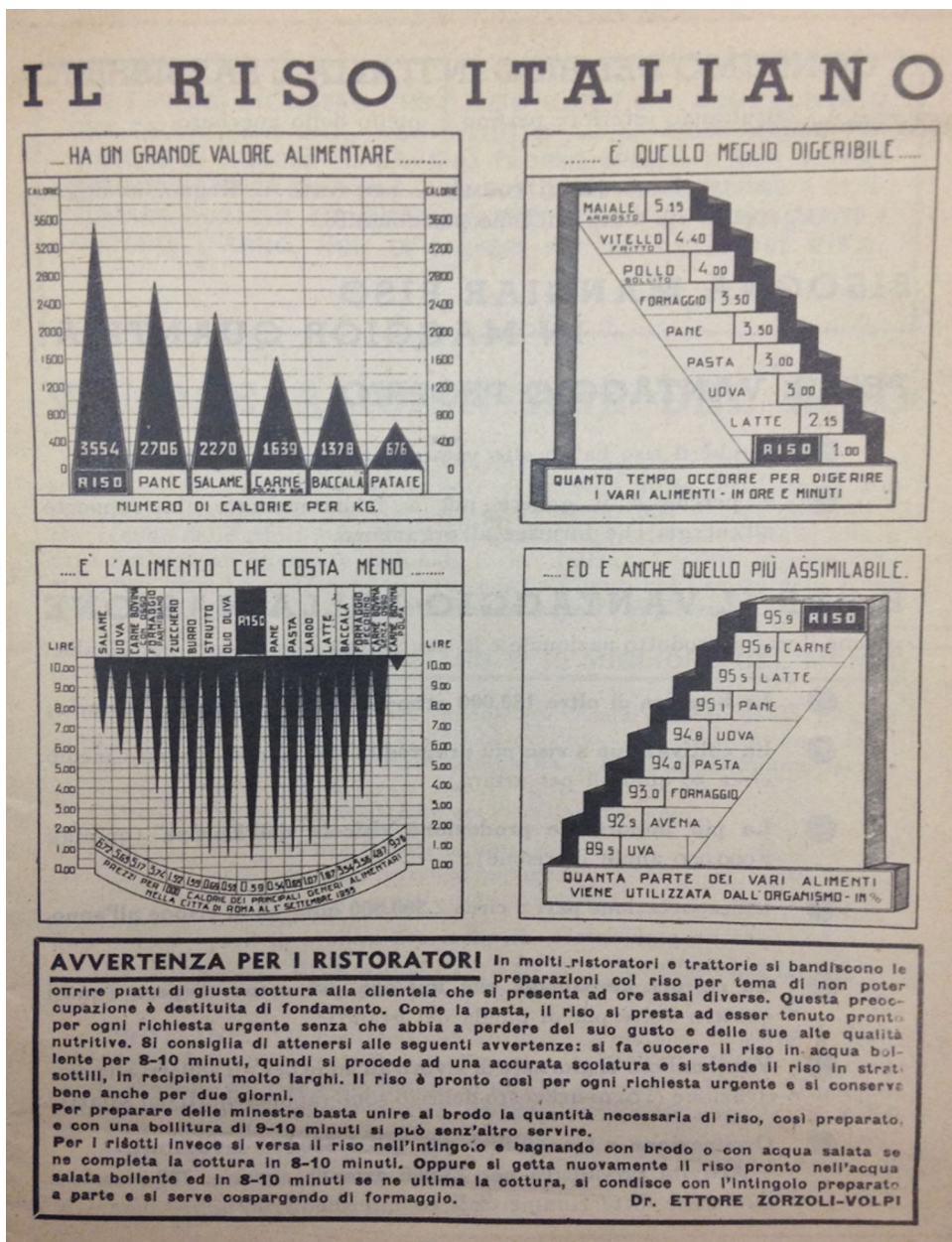
The regime often equated innovation with quantification. The trope of math as modernity informs the ubiquitous charts and graphs that inevitably accompany the *ricettari*. Given that these documents purported to serve culinary rather than political aims, the inclusion of so much scientific data is conspicuous, and marks the *ricettari* as a hybrid form of propaganda. It contains materials associated with three different spaces: the private home, the public rally, and the scientific laboratory. But it is this intersection of the culinary and the political that allowed these documents to bring

national political projects into the kitchen where autarky could be enacted. Four graphs exemplify this fusion (Figure 5).<sup>9</sup> Complexity reigns: Data presentation eschews typical pie charts and bar graphs for rising staircases and dripping icicles. The x- and y-axes contain long phrases detailing obscure facts in miniscule print, such as “Prices per 1000 calories of the principal food products in the city of Rome on September 1, 1935.” A closer look reveals all four diagrams to be variations on standard bar graphs, but their intricacy obfuscates the data’s interpretation.

Could the average working-class woman have interpreted the scientific data available in these convoluted charts? Would she have wanted to devote so much time and energy to deciphering the information? It seems unlikely. These charts appear to willfully complicate the material they present so as to nudge the audience to read only the headings. But their bewildering forms serve a purpose: they appear meant to astonish the reader with their scientific modernity, and to lend that authority to other claims of rice’s superiority found throughout the *ricettario*. In short, they were designed to impress, rather than to inform. By contrast, unsubstantiated claims in the heading use large, neat script to aid legibility and comprehension, “Italian rice ... has a greater caloric value... is the more digestible option ... is the food that costs less ... and is the most assimilable.” Assimilability, the capacity for a food to be broken down and absorbed by the body, greatly concerned early twentieth century dieticians.

Nutritional charts and graphs fall into Ruth Ben-Ghiat’s “new technologies of information” that sought to shape bodies and behaviors to promote the domestic economy (Ben-Ghiat 2004). Chief among these technologies was the recent discovery of the calorie (Cullather 2007). Because calories could quantify the invisible processes of how food transformed flesh, the regime could exploit nutrition to martial the contours of the body through food.

Health frames the project, and serves as the implicit goal in promoting autarkic foodstuffs. As mentioned previously, Alimenti Dahò’s rice *ricettario* casts rice in medicinal terms by pointing to its suitability for nourishing infants, the elderly, and the sick. Given this treatment, *ricettari* might be characterized as a closer relative to the original, medical conception of recipes than the modern, primarily culinary variants. Through what Jack Goody called “prescribed actions,” recipes attempted to create physical and mental change. This medical conception of the recipe helps to account for the obsession with sickness and hygiene infusing these documents (Goody 1997; Newlyn 1999). However, the historical moment that produced these *ricettari* implies political concerns as well. Improving the health and hygiene of the Italian citizenry buttressed the larger Fascist goal of demographic growth. The typeface, organization, and explicitly autarkic framing



**Figure 5.** Mangiate Riso (Eat Rice) ricettario interior page, 1935, published by Ente Nazionale Risi (National Rice Board), 7.5 by 6.5 inches, p. 7 (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, ITAL 2XB1992.1798).

of these foods, always denoted as Italian, mirror National Institute of Statistics graphs and charts used by the government to track the rise of Italy's domestic population.

It would be an overstatement to claim that *ricettari* constitute an explicit government bid for demographic manipulation. But these documents do



evoke multiple, concurrent projects of the Fascist regime. Recall that Gino Boccasile's *ricettario* cover placed an infant front and center, suggesting a potential connection between the apparently disparate government initiatives for autarky and pronatalism. In many ways, this medicalized concern for nourishing weak bodies through autarky to promote demographic might foreshadows what Scarpellini refers to as *la cucina di guerra*, the cooking of extreme privation that characterized Italy's culinary climate during World War II (Scarpellini 2014; De Grazia and Furlough 1996).

### ***Postwar legacies of the ricettari***

Despite these publicity campaigns, interest in rice remained minimal (Cinotto 2011; Helstosky 2004b; Sorcinelli 2001, Passerini 1987). Southern Italians resisted the National Rice Board's official line that rice offered superior nutrition and flavor due to lingering associations between this product and the bland rations of World War I, when the government distributed rice as a bread substitute (Helstosky 2004b). Moreover, incorporating rice into the Southern Italian diet ran directly counter to traditions of regional foodways: pasta ruled the Mezzogiorno menu. But novel ingredients and preparations met natural limits for absorption: by 1942, workers in the Northern regions of Piedmont, Lombardy, Tre Venezie, and Emilia consumed 1,400 grams of rice per day and 600 grams of pasta per week. By comparison, Southerners seem to have not only rejected the introduction of rice, but to have reacted against it in their habitual consumption: in Abruzzo, Campania, Puglia, Lucania, and Calabria, rice consumption hovered at 400 grams per person, less than a fourth of the 2,100 grams of pasta eaten weekly. In Sicily and Sardinia, rice consumption plummeted to 200 grams per person per week, roughly the weight of a single *arancino* (deep-fried rice ball) (ISTAT 1942).<sup>10</sup>

Antipathy toward rice lingered well into the postwar years. Through the 1940s and 50s, even the homeless routinely refused rice offered by Southern Italian soup kitchens, leading the Enti Comunali di Assistenza to substitute beans for rice relief packets in 1959. Only one group requested more rice from the Alto Commissariato dell'Alimentazione: the Italian Society of Dog Lovers routinely wrote from 1945 to 1950, requesting broken rice to feed their purebred dogs (Helstosky 2004b). In the minds of many Southern Italians, rice remained unfit for human consumption.

*Ricettari* are consistent in their failures, in that they did not ultimately convince women to change their eating habits voluntarily. Due as much to the regime's fragmentary execution as to culinary resistance, *ricettari* reflect the reality of chaos so typical of Fascist regimes as much as their totalitarian intent. In their appeal to the sectors of Italian society who were not

reading glossy periodicals like *La Cucina Italiana*, *ricettari* show how the regime approached a struggling group of women who were critical to the success of Fascist domestic food policy and utterly failed to change their recipes.<sup>11</sup>

Peasants from the nineteenth and early twentieth century who ate only one type of grain, like polenta, were usually unhealthy. The intended readership of the *ricettari* would have had first-hand knowledge autarkic grains alone would not make them or their families plump. Moreover, rejecting rice and the *ricettari* that promoted this ingredient speaks to a deeply human impulse. Choosing what dishes to cook and how to prepare them was one of the few broadly acceptable arenas for demonstrating female autonomy. While it would be a stretch to argue that not eating rice constituted resistance to the Fascist regime, this culinary refusal is nonetheless historically significant. During the darkest years of dictatorship, it represents a broad dismissal of state intrusion into private kitchens. This legacy of the *ricettari* identifies peasant women as protagonists in testing the limits of the “cooking of consent” (Helstosky 2004b).

### ***Ricettari as representations of fascist foodways***

Scholars have pointed to the need to understand women’s lived experience of Fascism through its material culture and propaganda. As Emanuela Scarpellini has observed, “In the long run, the major efforts [of the regime] had very different effects than originally intended. Their history is interesting, in that it can respond to important questions—who were the addressees of these campaigns? Were propaganda and advertising enough to sell a product? What factors really influenced consumption?” (Scarpellini 2014). This article has addressed these questions by using culinary propaganda to evaluate the real effects of Fascist food policy. *Ricettari* can help us to recognize Fascist foodways not because they are representative of all totalitarian cookbooks but because they are hyper-representative of propaganda aimed at women that could easily breach the private sphere with fascist ideology. They could advance totalitarian goals that could not be achieved through more traditional forms of propaganda because of their apparent similarity to cookbooks.

*Ricettari* thus reveal a distinctly Fascist approach to food, one that attempted to swallow up regional ingredients and preparations so as to groom the national body for war. They approached cooking, in particular ingredient selection and ratios, as a form of body politics. They even took a pronatalist approach to cuisine. Ultimately, these documents reveal that the Fascist regime mobilized recipes to reshape the body politic by introducing different grains to local foodways. Through *ricettari*, the regime

attempted to leverage women's cooking work, changing what people eat so as to reform the body, with the ultimate goal of creating a new kind of Italian nationalism that operated at the level of the cell.

## Notes

1. Examples include Gino Boccasile, *Mangiate Riso (Eat Rice) ricettario* text, 1935, published by Ente Nazionale Risi (National Rice Board), 7.5 by 6.5 inches, p. 2. (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, ITAL XB1992.1821). Emilio Dahò, *Lievito Dahò Ricettario per dolci. (Dahò Yeast Recipe Pamphlet for Desserts) ricettario*, 1934, published by Emilio Dahò, Milan, 4.75 by 6.8 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, XB1992.1821). Emida, *Tapioca e fecole, note e ricette. (Tapioca and Starch, Notes and Recipes) ricettario*, c. 1933, published by Fratelli Mosca and Emilio Dahò, 7 by 5 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, XB1992.1818). Fabbriche Riunite Amido Glucosio Destrina, *Le cento ricette maizena. (One Hundred Cornflour Recipes) ricettario*, c. 1925, published by Vaghi & Mascheroni, Milan, 7 by 5 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, XB1992.2149). Italo Zetti, *Maizena: la chiave della buona cucina. (Cornflour: the Key to Good Cooking), ricettario*, 1950, published by Pietro Vero, Milan, 6 by 8 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, XB1992.1804). Pisonis, *Per ben cucinare! Ricettario pratico con preziose notizie per la buona cucina. (Cooking well! Practical Recipe Book with Precise Information for the Good Kitchen.)* c. 1930s, published by Luigi Conte, Genoa, 8 by 6 inches. (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, XB1992.2174)
2. Milanese *ricettari* account for the majority: Emilio Dahò, *Lievito Dahò Ricettario per dolci. (Dahò Yeast Recipe Pamphlet for Desserts) ricettario*, 1934, published by Emilio Dahò, Milan, 4.75 by 6.8 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, XB1992.1821), Fabbriche Riunite Amido Glucosio Destrina, *Le cento ricette maizena. (One Hundred Cornflour Recipes) ricettario*, c. 1925, published by Vaghi, Milan, 7 by 5 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, XB1992.2149). Italo Zetti, *Maizena: la chiave della buona cucina. (Cornflour: the Key to Good Cooking), ricettario*, 1950, published by Pietro Vero, Milan, 6 by 8 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, XB1992.1804).
3. For newsreels, see "Italia Agricola," July 1931. *Giornale Luce B. Archivio Luce*. Film code B0307. July 1931. For documentary, see "Il lavoro in risaia," 1938. *Archivio Luce*, Film code D065708.
4. Rice propaganda attempted to counter the masculine prestige associated with meat and protein by leveraging dietics to argue that, although it might have fewer calories, rice was also more digestible. To cheaply power a military body, *ricettari* argued, fighters should eat rice. See "Il riso italiano" chart in Figure 5.
5. We see this bid for control in domestic literature and didactic newsreels that aimed to teach regime-approved cooking methods and childrearing practices. For regime control over the insides of homes via prescriptive domestic literature, see *L'organizzazione scientifica del lavoro*, ed. "Note di economia domestica." *Domus*, February 1937, xvi-xxx. *Domus*, August 1939. Milan: Editoriale Domus Società Anonima and Domus, ed. 1937. *Il libro di casa 1938*. Rome: Cirio. For regime control over the insides of bodies via foodways and maternal care via didactic newsreels, see *La Protezione della Stirpe*. 1933 Rome: Istituto Nazionale Luce and *Alle Madri d'Italia*. 1935. Directed by Pietro Francisci. Rome: Istituto Nazionale Luce.



6. Emilio Dahò, *Lievito Dahò Ricettario per dolci*. (*Dahò Yeast Recipe Pamphlet for Desserts*) *ricettario*, 1934, published by Emilio Dahò, Milan, 4.75 by 6.8 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, XB1992.1821)
7. See *Alimenti Dahò Monografie: Il riso, note e ricette* (*Dahò Foods: Monograph: Rice, notes and recipes*) c. 1935, published by Emilio Dahò, Milan, 8 by 6 inches. (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, ITAL XB1992.1819).
8. See Amalia Moretti Foggia, *200 suggerimenti per ... questi tempi difficili*. Milan: Sonzogno, 1943, *Desinaretti per ... questi tempi*. Milan: Sonzogno, 1944, *Ricettario per I tempi difficili*. Milan: Sonzogno, 1942, *Ricette per tempi eccezionali*. Milan: Sonzogno, 1941.
9. See Gino Boccasile, *Mangiate Riso (Eat Rice) ricettario* text, 1935, published by Ente Nazionale Risi (National Rice Board), 7.5 by 6.5 inches, pp. 3-4. (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, ITAL 2XB1992.1798). Also see Pisonis, *Per ben cucinare! Ricettario pratico con preziose notizie per la buona cucina*. (*Cooking well! Practical Recipe Book with Precise Information for the Good Kitchen*.) c. 1930s, published by Luigi Conte, Genoa, 8 by 6 inches. (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, XB1992.2174). Emida, *Tapioca e fecole, note e ricette*. (*Tapioca and Starch*) *ricettario*, c. 1933, published by Fratelli Mosca, 7 by 5 inches (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, XB1992.1818).
10. Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia (ISTAT). 1942. "Razionamento: Tav. VII. Generi alimentari razionati e tesserati" in *Compendio Statistico Italiano 1943*. Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 116.
11. Women's almanacs, like the *Almanacco della Donna Italiana*, produced by private publishing companies, like Bemporad and Marzocco, include articles written on behalf of Fascist food policy boards, like the National Rice Board and the Grain Consortium. In recurrent calls from 1935 to 1942 for women to use the *ricettari* they receive at Fascist rallies and festivals, they evidence the regime's continued enthusiasm for this publication program and women's disinterest. For characteristic examples, see *Almanacco della donna italiana 1936*. Rome: Bemporad and *Almanacco della donna italiana 1941*. Florence: Marzocco. For counter-reactions written as firsthand accounts, see Angela Baldi. Testimony of Angela Baldi, 1903-1982. Transcript of manuscript MP/T 01087, Archivio dei Diari, Pieve Santo Stefano, Italy, 1997 and Antonietta Chierici. Testimony of Antonietta Chierici "Mia madre: una donna dell'Emilia," 1920-1960. Transcript of manuscript MP/Adn2 05024, Archivio dei Diari, Pieve Santo Stefano, Italy.

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