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The Pioneer's Feast: Colonial Menus in Italian East Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article examines colonial Italian menus used in interwar Ethiopia and Eritrea to understand how private companies supported Fascism's imperial projects. Feasts celebrated battlefield victories, steamship journeys, and settlement soirees. Menus produced by shipping companies (Rex, Lloyd Triestino) and banks (Banca di Roma) for use by Italian colonists on Ethiopian settlements speaks to the economics of the regime, demonstrating how corporations used food to uphold and extend Fascist narratives of racial superiority. Herein lies a core contention of this article: the engine of fascist power lay in its financial supporters – that is, in industry.

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He bought a one-way steamship ticket for the Rex Conte di Savoia, leaving from the Bay of Naples to Asmara, one of the thousands of Benito Mussolini's legionnaires.¹ He stands on the top deck, blinking against the light bouncing off the white paint from the bridge to the bulkheads. Sea winds nip at him through the worn holes of his coat and fill his nostrils. First comes the tang of ocean bracken and smokestack fumes (Figure 1) then garden smells from the farmhouse he left in Puglia: sharp lemon, piney rosemary, and some he can't name, spicy and rank.² He wanders across the lido deck verandah (Figure 2), descending the stairs by the softer light of electric candles, to arrive at the elegant dining room (Figure 3). He feels out of place, nervous about spilling wine on the thick white tablecloths or fumbling with the heavy silverware. It is so different from his simple wooden table at home. But once he sits, he begins to relax. He considers the cover of the menu before him, its cover a photocollage that blends familiar Italian monuments with new Ethiopian ones. Just months ago, the Duce stood on a podium in the Piazza Vittorio Veneto, and proclaimed that he, a middle-aged veteran, would bring Italian civilization to East Africa. With this patriotic assignment in mind, he opens the menu, and he wonders, "What would a pioneer eat for dinner?"

For historians, menus answer critical questions about what we eat and why. Today, Italians continue to imbue menu items with political meanings. How does a menu prime the diner to think about their meal? Why do we remember dishes based on these authoritative descriptions as much as the flavors we tasted? By including some ingredients and preparations and not others, menus profoundly shape our notion of the boundaries and borders of national traditions of cookery. Culinary gatekeeping matters most when cuisines collide, as they did during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Here,



Figure 1. Advertisement for the Rex conte di Savoia steamship, tourist class tickets. Attributed to Gino Boccasile. 1936. 9 by 11 inches.



Figure 2. Photograph of Rex steamship captain, upper deck. 1936. 4 by 6 inches. (Everett E. Viez Collection of the Steamship Historical Society of America, Cranston, RI).



Figure 3. Photograph of Rex steamship dining room. 1936. 4 by 6 inches. (Everett E. Viez Collection of the Steamship Historical Society of America, Cranston, RI).

menus mapped occupied territories, and attempted to reinscribe the values of the Roman metropole in East African empire.

Menu covers taught how to look with colonial eyes. Menu content taught how to eat with a colonial stomach. Much excellent scholarship of Fascist Italy has examined agriculture and food production in empire. Relatively less attention has been paid to the consumption of what Emanuela Scarpellini has termed *la cucina coloniale*.³ To address this lacuna in the research, this article introduces a new body of culinary ephemera from the Musei delle Aziende chain, especially the Archivio Barilla. Namely, it traces the chronological arc of the Italian occupation using six menus used in the East African empire from 1896 to 1937.

At its simplest, a menu provides the means for restaurants to list their dishes. The world's earliest menu featured paintings of ducks and roosters to advertise the different meat dishes available to diners at a Pompeii thermopolium, a fast-food eatery dating from the second century BCE. Perfectly preserved by the hot ash of Vesuvius, they still look tasty today. Menus do not tell us what most people ate. Instead, they tell us more about what cooks wanted people to eat. Relatedly, menus speak to the ingredients available to cooks, as well the preparation spaces and cooking technologies available, as noted by Ken Albala in his analysis of the role of menus within cookbooks.⁴ Menus also offer a sensorial account of the dining options available to certain groups of people, typically elites. Jean-Louis Flandrin points to a further precept followed here: the order of presentation of dishes, which expresses the art of eating well, is neither natural nor universal.⁵ As such, they can tell us much about the cultural prestige of different foods. For food historians, the high cultural status of menus provides some archival advantages, in that it accords provenance information and document preservation. Elite diners of the past treated menus as collectible culinary souvenirs, the basis of many archival menu collections today. As William Weaver observed, "Once a menu has fulfilled its function as a tool of ordering, it becomes part of a diner's experience."⁶

Menus are not only catalogs of culinary desire. They are also opinion pieces that argue for one entrée over another. Menus must persuade diners to eat certain dishes, as noted by Rebecca Pearlman.⁷ Persuasion, vis a vis Italy's colonial projects, went hand in hand with propaganda. This tendency reached its apex at the historical context of the Italian dictatorship. Menus produced in the interwar period can be read as a type of prescriptive, even coercive literature of Fascist food trends. Acknowledging the rhetorical work performed by colonial menus matters in the context of Italy and East Africa, two locations that did not experience a culture of abundance for the time period. I read these menus, created to celebrate battlefield victories, steamship journeys, and settlement soirees, as culinary propaganda, produced by private companies to support Italy's imperial projects in East Africa. Menus produced by shipping companies (Rex, Lloyd Triestino) and banks (Banca di Roma) for use by Italian colonists on Ethiopian settlements speaks to the corporatist economics of Fascism, demonstrating how private companies used food to uphold and extend regime narratives of the cultural superiority of the Italian race.⁸ Herein lies a core contention of this article: the true engine of Fascist power lay in its financial supporters – that is, in the corporations that provided the steamships and settlements in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and who penned some of the most popular narratives of culinary nationalism in Italy.

Italy was a relative latecomer to the European Scramble for Africa. Private industry led the charge, with the Rubattino steamship company's acquisition of the Bay of Assab in 1869. Francesco Crispi became prime minister with a platform of industrialization and overseas expansion. The popularity of his imperial program, sustained by strongman tactics, in many ways foreshadows Mussolini's later approach. Under Crispi, the Italian government employed troops to occupy Asmara, and formed the first Italian battalion composed of indigenous soldiers (*askari*) in 1888. Subsequently the territory transferred to government hands, and in 1890, Italy claimed its *colonia primogenita*, its "first-born colony," named Eritrea after the classical Greek term for the Red Sea. In the first years of the 1890s, Italian farmers began to settle in the central highlands. In the First Italo-Ethiopian War, Liberal Italy used Eritrea as a military staging ground for expansion southward to Ethiopia. But in the Battle of Adwa in 1896, Ethiopian forces routed the invading Italians in the only major victory of African over European forces at the time. A new coalition rose from the trenches of World War I. Destitute veterans and wealthy landowners alike supported Benito Mussolini, and his vow to resurrect the military glory and prestige of Ancient Rome. Both groups, apparently at odds, shared common cause in their concern for the source and price of their daily bread. At state banquets in occupied East Africa, Italian cooks attempted to determine what dishes should feature on menus for Fascism's new imperial cuisine.

The Fascist regime, I argue, believed that food and farming possessed biopolitical power. They (re)formed the body from the inside out. Gastrofascism, as we might call this tendency, uses food to fuse people and place, adding a biopolitical layer to Fabio Parasecoli's term, "gastronativism."⁹ It brings recent biopolitical readings of Italian labor history in empire, such as those from Rhiannon Welch and Francesco Cassata, to bear on food and drink.¹⁰ In doing so, this article aims to compare three contemporary culinary narratives against the history of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia and Eritrea. As such, this project might be considered a culinary contribution to what Caterina Miele has called the "archeology of Italian racism."¹¹ I treat culinary ephemera as a Fascist-period

midden, a not-so-ancient trash heap from which we might excavate the artifacts of empire. They reveal the successive stages of construction of culinary nationalism, a collection of commercial narratives that continue to shape the relationship between African and European diets and cultures, and their menus, today.

Feasting as Statescraft: Battlefield Menus

Menus for official dinners, particularly for government occasions attended by state dignitaries, could be considered among the most prescriptive of political menus, in that diners would be informed as to what they would eat, and could not pick and choose among different options. The first section of this article analyzes two battlefield-themed menus crafted as take-home souvenirs for state dinners honoring military conflicts during the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1895 to 1896) and the immediate aftermath. Watercolor illustrations depicting calm and even convivial moments on the front lines of combat decorate hand-lettered lists of sumptuous dishes. Both leveraged the commemorative capacity of these keepsake objects. Contrary to what we might think today, late 19th century menus were not fussy dust-catchers that stayed locked away in drawers. Rather, they were actively used to disseminate political narratives.

Menus like these deployed a powerful form of propaganda. “We eat more myths than calories,” as a French chef put it.¹² At the time, France still maintained culinary hegemony in elite circles from Ancona to Asmara. The Royal Houses of Savoy (Turin) and Solomon (Addis) employed artists to create menus for ceremonial events, which diners took home at the end of an evening. These objects wrote the scripts for the show-and-tell of salon visiting hours. Taking out a menu to describe an elegant evening not only meant describing what you ate, but also the broader political significance of the event. In other words, menus provided elites with a means to write the scripts for minor political actors, the feast attendees, to talk about the relative success or failure of national projects. They provided the scripts for dinner theater.

Such theater took place Hamasén, located just outside of Asmara, Eritrea. Once the political and economic center of a mighty empire, Hamasén had been even more powerful than Addis under the Solomonic dynasty. But it shared many of its features: it was Orthodox Christian, and its wealth relied on a complex taxation system that spread throughout empire, in this case as far south as Suakin in modern Sudan. In the late nineteenth century, Hamasien was briefly invaded and occupied by Emperor Yohannes’ Ethiopian forces. Following the Emperor’s death at the Battle of Gallabat, Italian forces swept in, turning Hamasén into occupied territory once more.

Consider the menu for a formal dinner held in Hamasén, a then-rural area just outside of the Eritrean capital of Asmara, in March 1896 (Figure 4). Written in Ge’ez script, it details the meal enjoyed by the Regional Commissariat of Hamasén.¹³ It is stamped with the Italian designation of a meal for the Chief of Police, the “Commissario dell’Hamasén,” but all menu items are hand-lettered for legibility in Tigrinya. This menu shows two watercolor images alongside a list of the evening’s culinary offerings. The first image shows six women as they prepare to serve the evening’s dishes. To protect the dishes from insects and wind, each dish is covered with a conical lid made of straw. A seventh woman gathers the last dish, freshly prepared inside a *tucul* hut. The second image takes us to dinner (Figure 5). It shows



Figure 4. Front of hand-drawn, painted, and lettered menu cover in Ge'ez and Italian script, "Il Commissario Regionale dell'Hamasén," "The Regional Commissariat of Hamasén." Artist Unknown, Asmara, Eritrea, March 1896, 4 by 7 inches. (Archivio Storico Barilla, Parma, Italia).



Figure 5. Reverse of hand-drawn, painted, and lettered menu cover in Ge'ez and Italian script, "Il Commissario Regionale dell'Hamasén," "The Regional Commissariat of Hamasén." Artist Unknown, Asmara, Eritrea, March 1896, 4 by 7 inches (Archivio Storico Barilla, Parma, Italia).

the dignitaries, a mix of young and old to judge by the color of their hair, seated as they begin to eat. Functionaries of lower rank stand behind them, eating with one hand up to cover their mouths to demonstrate their respect. This "Dinner in the Grand Salon" offered the meat-heavy dishes that marked the guests as men of stature. The meal begins with *brindo* (a raw meat dish similar to *carpaccio*) and *tuccus zighini* (cubed meat in a spicy sauce), before moving on to *siksiko* (mixed vegetables spiced with the hot pepper mix *berbere*) and *tips* (pan-fried meat spiked with additional *berbere*). This diplomatic event concludes with a palate-cleansing *arechè nategg* (mead flavored with anise seed).¹⁴

Throughout the menu, dishes evoke high social status and a common culinary cannon, two qualities that frequently determine the menus for diplomatic events. These characteristics do different kinds of social work at the table. First, expensive meat dishes and beverage choices signal to the attendees that their presence at the dinner is acknowledged and valued. An Eritrean dignitary sitting down to this meal would have felt himself respected, ready to get down to the business of interregional political agreements. Here, the quality of the foods chosen comes to the fore: these dishes were uncontroversial, being broadly recognized within the canon of Eritrean cuisine. Imagine what could have happened if a regional Eritrean dish were offered. A meat dish from Massawa might signal the preferred position of one delegate over another, setting the stage for conflict. Selecting dishes that would have been familiar to the majority of the delegates avoids this issue. Moreover, these are not foods that draw attention to themselves, with unusual flavors or novel preparations. The menu aims to placate, and to keep the focus on the discussion. These were high-status, broadly agreeable dishes, meaning that they would have primed people to focus on the talk over the table, put them in an agreeable frame of mind.¹⁵

The timing of this event is significant. It took place in between two major battles in East African history. First, the Italians had been defeated in the Battle of Adwa on March 1, 1896, a major African military triumph over European forces during this time. This celebratory menu is a means to commit this victory to memory roughly a month and a half after the battle, using sumptuous national cuisine as shorthand for the might of Eritrea.

The Battle of Amba Alagi occurred one month after the event. It was the first in a series of battles between the Italian General Baratieri and Ethiopia's Emperor Menelik during the First Italo-Ethiopian War. Amba Alagi was one of Baratieri's forward positions; it was under the command of Major Toselli with 2,000 Eritrean Askari. On December 7, 1895, Ras Makonnen, Ras Welle Betul, and Ras Mengesha Yohannes commanded an assault of Menelik's vanguard that annihilated the Italians and killed Major Toselli. However, the defeat at Amba Alagi did have a silver lining for Baratieri. Prime Minister Crispi's shocked cabinet agreed to advance another 20 million lire to ensure that a disaster could be stopped.

A remarkable precedent for Italian imperial feasting as statecraft comes from the House of Solomon in Ethiopia. Ten years prior to the Battle of Adwa, Emperor Menelik declared Addis Ababa to be the modern capital of Ethiopia in 1886. The following year, Empress Taytu stamped her consort's triumph into national memory by hosting a five-day feast. Though the event formally honored the consecration of Entoto Maryam, the Church of Saint Mary, it also served a critical political purpose. Through expensive ingredients and complex dishes drawn from geopolitically significant cities across the Abyssinian empire, this event heralded Addis as the national capital, the nexus of key trade routes running outwards from the central highlands of Shawa. It was a culinary program of shock and awe, showcasing economic power with meat, butter, and spices. Servants slayed over five thousand oxen, cows, sheep, and goats. They stockpiled hundreds of clay pots, filled with spiced, clarified butter. Rivers of *tej* (mead, or "honey wine") flowed, thanks to the work of construction teams who built hilltop storehouses equipped with wooden troughs leading to the banquet site. It aimed to show the might of Ethiopian

monarchy, to ward off military advances from foreign powers, including Italian-occupied Eritrea to the north, and Sudanese Mahdist forces to the west.

Thanks to interviews with retired members of the kitchen staff that have been expertly translated and interpreted by Jim McCann, we have an in-depth chronicle of the event from behind the scenes.¹⁶ With this feast, Taytu borrowed from the elaborate court culture of Gondar. Before its absorption into Menelik's empire, Gondar maintained its wealth through property law, a system that Menelik would later adapt to his national taxation system. But Gondar also boasted strong diplomatic ties within Abyssinia, thanks to an elaborate court culture that used feasting as statescraft. At Taytu's feast, as well as many other diplomatic events, emblematic luxury foods like *berbere* hot spice and *delleh* pepper paste colored stews a volcanic red. They also spoke to the span of Taytu's influence since pepper came from Yejju, the queen's land in southern Wallo, two weeks' ride to the north, and from Bulga, Geren, her lowland holdings in northern Shawa, much closer to the capital. Along with *berbere*, honey lacquered many dishes. It too evoked the reach of the royal court, as Menelik accepted honey in lieu of annual tax funds from Gera. In Ethiopia as in Italy this was a period of nationalization, incarnated at the feast as a bid to create culinary cohesion.

However, as Jim McCann observed, Taytu's feast "demonstrated choices about inclusion in – and exclusion from – the building of an African polity during Africa's colonial era."¹⁷ Taytu curated the feast, a celebration of a church, along Orthodox Christian lines. Foods from Muslim-dominated cities to the east, like the vassal kingdom of Jimma and market town of Harar, conquered mere months before the feast, presented a challenge for the meal planning. To suggest the strategic importance of Addis' domination of these areas without running afoul of culinary prohibitions, Taytu relied on these cities for décor, like baskets and tablecloths, and kitchenware (utensils, pots, and pans) rather than ingredients.¹⁸ As McCann observes, "Ethiopia's own idea of an empire created from disparate kingdoms was a reaction in many ways to wider European ambitions in Africa and the Nile Valley as manifested at the Berlin conference two years before, when European delegates redrew African colonial borders."¹⁹ In the architecture of this feast, Empress Taytu aimed a deft defense of Ethiopia on two fronts. First, she leveraged ingredients and materials with diplomacy in mind. This feast centered Addis through cuisine, and aimed to forge the disparate regions of Abyssinian empire into a cohesive national canon of recipes. At least one document suggests she was successful. When Dr. P. Mérab recorded his impressions of dinners and dining in the royal court from his unique vantage point as Emperor Menelik's personal physician in his 1913 memoir, *Impressions d'Étiopie*, he was able to articulate a list of dishes that emblemized Ethiopia's emergent national cuisine. Second, Empress Taytu planned the presentation of this event to awe the outside world with the power and organization of the Abyssinian empire. Feasting meant warning: the menu menaced with its economic might and geographic expanse, cautioning European powers that their imperial dreams might turn out to be nightmares.

The second menu, this one in Italian, commemorated the Adi Ugri First Indigenous Battalion on April 13, 1901, in the Eritrean city of Adi Ugri, not far from the Ethiopian border (Figure 6).²⁰ Dinner began with a light French-inspired consommé, followed by Milanese risotto. Venetian flan, roast meat with salad, and an unspecified dessert followed. Coffee, wines, and liquors concluded the meal. These dishes represent the



Figure 6. Hand-painted watercolor menu, “1° Battaglione Indigeni,” “First Indigenous Battagliion.” Artist Unknown, Adi Ugri, Eritrea, 1901, 4 by 7 inches (Archivio Storico Barilla, Parma, Italia).

Italian north, not the south, and Italian cities, not the countryside. We also see lingering French influence in the *consommé* and *dessert*. It is a menu that declares Italianness with regionality, but this culinary map of the nation is incomplete, in that it occludes geographic zones of limited economic power. This menu maps the culinary geography of the elite. Here, dishes from the industrial powerful north, both within the national context of Italy (Piedmont, Lombardy) and more broadly in Europe (France) come to stand for the whole of the nation’s cuisine. There are no dishes from the Italian south, and no let alone dishes from East Africa. Mixing cuisines could have threatened racial boundaries. Diet, along with other measures for “social defense and multiplication” held fascist demographic politics in place.²¹ Here, diplomatic logic emphasizes broad culinary commonalities as a tool for consensus. This Italian menu, like the Eritrean menu examined earlier, is culinarily conservative. It emphasizes easily recognizable, high-status dishes to stand for the whole of a nation’s cuisine. If the attendees at this state event could agree on the food, then perhaps this conviviality could prime them to agree on politics.

Decorating the menu is a watercolor painting. It illustrates the evening scene in the vein of the colonial picturesque. Campfires dot the hill’s edge, with two figures seated at one fire, set against the night sky as the first stars appear. Why depict a darkened sky? On the night of February 29, 1896, that is, the night before the battle, there was a lunar eclipse, taken as an auspicious sign for certain victory in battle for the following morning.

At the center, an Eritrean Askari soldier, dressed in a high red fez and with his bayonet in hand, stands in a highland meadow. Although this menu takes pains to cast the Askari soldier as a noble and even glamorous figure who fought on behalf of Italians, motives for enlistment were economic rather than patriotic. After World War I, service with the Ascaris became the main source of paid employment for the indigenous male population of Italian Eritrea. During the expansion required by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936, 40 percent of eligible Eritreans were enrolled in these colonial troops. Widespread enlistment should not be taken for enthusiasm for the Italian presence. The Italian press mythologized the physical strength of the Askari, and claimed their needs and wants were nearly non-existent. In April 1935, an article published in *L’Oltremare* claimed that, by

nature, Askari ate almost nothing: “The soldier is very thrifty; a handful of flour or chickpeas is enough to feed it for a whole day.”²² Such myths were self-serving, a justification for poor rations and low pay. Adi Ugri, the site of this elegant dinner, later became a key site for the Mendefera, translated literally as “no one dared,” a leading anti-colonial movement.

The foods served at these national and international state occasions served a particular political function. They aimed to create a collective culinary experience that would transform heterogeneous individual actors into a likeminded group.²³ We can think of the dishes served at these royal and government banquets as being an edible corollary to the political speeches that accompanied these events. Herein lies the political work accomplished by the set menu of a state dinner: these culinary events were political occasions. Conviviality provided the pretext for the incorporation government-approved foods and ideas among Ethiopian and Italian elites on the eve of war.

In the years leading up to the Great War, Italy struggled to obtain sufficient grain stocks. Although the majority of the Italian diet was based on grain, Italy had never been self-sufficient in this field. Writing in retrospect, Minister of Corporations Ferruccio Lantini summed up the Italian grain import statistics through the 1910s and 1920s,

In the matter of cereals . . . our needs for wheat could not be satisfied, if not by resorting to purchases in foreign countries for huge quantities. Over 20 million quintals of wheat were imported annually until 1928 with an outlay of currency that even exceeded two billion lire a year.²⁴

And yet, the Italian pasta industry was very successful during these years. In 1913, Italian steamships ferried 71,000 tons of pasta across the Atlantic, mainly to the United States, which absorbed 45,000 tons of the total.²⁵ But it was also a high-water mark for the Italian pasta industry abroad, as the wartime trade interruptions created space for competition from Italian emigrants, who founded their own pasta factories in Canada, the United States, Brazil, and Argentina.²⁶ War was better for Italian food industry in Eritrea, as Zaccaria notes in his study of the Torrigiani canning plant. Also in 1913, the Ministry of War signed a decade-long contract with Torrigiani, providing the army with one million cans of tinned meat and broth concentrate annually. In return, he notes, the Eritrean government offered key territorial concessions, including “the construction of a railway section leading up to the factory (1 km); concession of the land; a special reduction in the cost of transportation up to Massawa; the possibility of free of charge storage in the army buildings in Massawa, and the use of the Colonial Treasury to send money to Italy.”²⁷ Despite early battlefield losses at Adua, Italy had obtained a foothold in Africa through commercial means.

During World War I, battle lines severed Italy’s supply chains to the east. With less flour arriving from Romania, Turkey, and Russia, shortages convulsed the peninsula in December 1914, and bread prices rose rapidly. Bakeries pulled dark loaves of “war bread,” made from chestnut and other non-grain flours, from their ovens. Violent bread strikes left fifty dead.²⁸ Against this backdrop, the Italian Ministry of Colonies launched the “valorization” of Eritrea in 1917. Its plan to make East Africa the granary of Italy was summed up by its motto, “Ask the Motherland for as little as possible and give her as much as possible.”²⁹ On February 8, 1917, De Martino summoned all regional commissioners to Asmara to deliver a message. Every field in Eritrea was to be resown

with Italian staples, including wheat, potatoes, and corn. Cultivation of barley and “cereals of indigenous consumption,” like teff, should cease immediately.³⁰ Despite propaganda for new colonial holidays like the Festa delle Granaglie (Grain Festival), Eritrean farmers questioned the efficacy of Italian agronomy. They had reason to be skeptical. Previous Italian animal husbandry schemes had spread rinderpest, which had decimated the formerly successful Eritrean livestock sector.³¹ Agricultural protests exploded from Kwä“atit to Akkälä Guzay.³² Dante Odorozzi, the Commissioner of Akkälä Guzay, conveyed the Eritrean farmers’ riposte to the Italian colonial government: fallow fields were an investment that paid off in the long run.³³ Rural unrest continued while Italy entrenched its dominion through urban outposts through commercial and military interventions. The Italian army recruited huge numbers of Askari soldiers, enlisting nearly 30 percent of the nation’s total population.³⁴

Eat Like a Colonist: Steamship Menus

In the years leading to the Ethiopian invasion, most Italian farmers opposed the prospect of a colonial war. A stocked pantry and steady employment were their primary concerns. Many saw Fascism’s imperial campaign for an East African granary for Italy as a dictatorial caprice, a toddler’s tantrum on an international stage that would ultimately leave their cupboards bare. Moreover, many believed that Ethiopia simply was not worth the trouble of taking.³⁵ Italy emerged from the Great War as part of the Allied Consortiums, with access to loans and cheap grain. At this point, Italy could have turned toward the booming American grain market to supply its domestic needs. But rather than accept this economic boon and the foreign trade ties attached, Benito Mussolini opted instead to pursue an autonomous policy of alimentary autarky, launching the Battle for Grain in 1926. Acting alone on an economic front primed Italians – now hungry for bread – for the regime’s unilateral military action.

On May 5, 1936, Marshall Pietro Badoglio’s legions entered Addis Ababa, capital of the new imperial Italian breadbasket. Haile Selassie I and his family fled Ethiopia. Once in England, he denounced Italy to the League of Nations. In Rome, Benito Mussolini proclaimed the establishment of the Italian Empire, with Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia united as one colony, Africa Orientale Italiana (AOI). He declared, “Ethiopia is Italian! Italian in fact, because occupied by our victorious armies; Italian in law, because with the gladiators of Rome, civilization triumphs over barbarity, justice over arbitrary cruelty.” But it was not the invasion that finally turned the tide of public opinion. Rather, it was the League of Nations sanctions against Italy for their unilateral military aggression that finally united farmers in favor of empire abroad.³⁶ The resurrection of Ancient Roman imperial glory in East Africa aimed to elevate Italy to the economic status of other European Great Powers by offering poor Italian farmers, “a place in the sun.” Together with the new status came visionary plans of a proletarian empire in which Italian colonists become landowners in Ethiopia, where they would enjoy the agricultural riches of the newly conquered lands.

The royals of the former Abyssinian empire were absentee landlords who relied on local sharecroppers to tend the fields. Italian agronomers believed that Ethiopian farmers would continue to till the fields of new Italian settlements, just as they had done for the old Ethiopian elite. The Italian colonial administration originally planned to confiscate

land by dispossessing the former elect, that is, by seizing Haile Selassie's estates and the lands owned by the Orthodox Christian church. Written proof of land ownership was required, allowing the Italian colonial government to seize communal lands and fallow fields from farmers' coalitions and small landowners. As noted by Haile Larebo, "few confiscations were preceded by a proper study of the status of the land."³⁷ As Sbacchi further notes, "In the area of Lake Tana alone, around 1,000,000 hectares were transferred to the colonial administration to make space for the planned Italian settlements."³⁸ Moreover, colonial agencies pushed Ethiopian farmers to accept land exchanges in far-flung locations to consolidate territory for Italian farms. The Italian government also created planned settlements like Romagna d'Etiopia. Located on 50,000 hectares of land between Dabat and Dacuà, the settlement was to host one thousand families from Benito Mussolini's native Emilia-Romagna. The Romagnol farmers were to act as stewards of the new colonial granary, as declared by Dr. G.B. Lusignani, the Head of the Agrarian Office of the Government of Amara.³⁹

In fact, if at first the greatest effort of the Ente Romagna of Ethiopia will be directed to the immigration of our settlers and to the production of cereals for the needs of food autonomy, subsequently the neighboring territories will be strengthened by the Italian intelligence for other needs in order to produce, in healthy and active collaboration with the local populations, raw materials such as oil and textile fibers of which the Motherland is a tributary of abroad.

The Amara missives included architectural plans and layouts. Houses were set in groups of four, with a communal stable attached. There was even a plan to add a capital, Predappio d'Etiopia, with one hundred forty domiciles reserved for settlers hailing from Mussolini's hometown.⁴⁰

But to populate the new settlements with Italian farmers, the colonial government first had to transport the colonists to Ethiopia. Steamships carried thousands of Italian colonists to Ethiopia via Libya on steamships, just as they had carried Italian immigrants to Argentina and Brazil in the preceding decades. Many remember these experiences as a 40-day exercise in misery, with poor conditions and disease. But in the interwar years, the experience of a colonial steamship crossing was very different. Large navigation companies fought amongst themselves to offer the most well-appointed travel at the lowest price. Companies like Lloyd Triestino boasted elegant boats like the *Conte di Savoia* and the *Rex*. The *Rex*, a Lloyd Triestino passenger ship, was built in the classic Art Deco Liner Style on the tenth anniversary of Mussolini's rise to power. The ship, made in Italy from Italian woods and metals, incarnated Fascism's dual promotion of imperialism and autarky.⁴¹ As noted by Albertini, "It is no accident that on the *Rex*, the most prestigious ship in the Italian mercantile fleet ... one no longer speaks of second class, but tourist class." To amplify and advertise the pleasures of colonialism, the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (the National Afterwork Club, known by the Italian acronym OND). Established by the Fascist regime in 1926, the OND provided recreational opportunities for the industrial workforce to compete with Socialist cultural clubs. Recreational outings focused on outdoor sports and leisure activities, such as skiing in the mountains or sunning by the seaside. They even organized weekend train trips to Genova so that factory workers could salute departing ships.⁴²

For the would-be colonists who boarded these ships for Ethiopia, daily life on deck taught Italians to see the world with imperial eyes. The Conte di Savoia and the Rex provided meals to passengers as part of the ticket price, with different dining selections accorded to first, second, and third-class passengers. A luxurious dining room offered menus filled with exotic ingredients, translated through Italian recipes. Italian waiters served as cultural translators of their own land, explaining northern dishes to southern passengers.⁴³ These meals constitute some of the first attempts by Italian chefs to make sense of how three world cuisines, European, North African, and East African, might come together to create a new fusion cuisine – or not.

At elegant hotel restaurants in major Italian cities, tourists would have encountered menu covers featuring architecture and cityscapes with photocollages or pen-and-ink drawings. The content almost invariably focused on upscale Italian or European settings.⁴⁴ These Italian travel menus from the metropole reveal a set of artistic commonalities: black and white photocollages, color lithographs of sweeping outdoor scenes, and pen-and-ink architectural renditions. Steamship menu covers then made use of these conventions, depicting both European and African sites as part of the same menu series. Art, served in the culinary context of steamship dining rooms, placed colonial sites under Italian rule. The Rex steamship menu covers provide an intriguing example of how a maritime company working under the Fascist aegis reconfigured the preexisting tropes of travel menu covers to highlight Fascist interests such as architecture and colonialism. While metropolitan menu covers rarely featured Libyan, Ethiopian, and Eritrean sites as Italian, steamship menus used artistic and culinary tactics to recast North and East African symbols of grandeur, like monuments and luxury foods, as Italian commodities.

Consider the Bergamesco Edizione Propaganda Rex menu series, created for the Lloyd Triestino shipping company. The Rex series, dating from 1935, includes twelve menu covers, each depicting the architecture or natural features within a given region of the Italian empire. Cast as touristic trinities within the cohesive national whole, with city-focused menus like the “Venezia – Verona – Padua” cover and monument-focused menus like the “Foro Mussolini – Il Vittoriano – Castel Sant’Angelo” cover. The visual consistency of the black-and-white photo collages almost blinds us to the addition of empire, with a menu cover featuring the towers of the “Axum – Leptis Magna – Rodi” (Figure 7). The photocollage foreshortens the history of the territories to their moment of inclusion in the Ancient Roman empire. Whereas even the natural park regions of a small part of Trentino-Alto Adige get their own menu cover (“Dolomites – Lago di Carezza – Bolzano”), Libya is reduced to Leptis Magna, Ethiopia to Axum, and Greece to the Roman ruins of Rhodes. The architectural preoccupations of the Fascists come to the forefront in the Rex menu covers in their insistence upon certain architectural features and styles. Sites associated with Ancient Roman presence across the Mediterranean take precedence, establishing a visual history of Italian conquest in Africa and beyond. In 1937, Benito Mussolini seized the Stele of Axum displayed on the Rex menu cover as Italian war booty, and the monument, broken into three pieces, was summarily sent to the Roman metropole – via steamship – for display (Figure 8).

This obsession with colonial monuments continues on another Rex steamship menu cover, “Libia – L’Arco di Trionfo sulla Nuova Litoranea” (Figure 9). The Art Deco color lithograph print shows the Marble Arch, constructed by the Italian Fascists along the new coastal road. Also known as the Arch of the Philaeni, the monument utterly dominates



Figure 7. Menu Cover, "Axum," in Rex Ocean liner menu series of Italian cities. Veneziani, Genoa, Italy, 1936, 9 by 12 inches. (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, Florida).



Figure 8. Photograph of the Stella of Axum in front of the Food and Agriculture Organization headquarters Testaccio, Rome.

the composition. It extends past the top of the cropped menu, as if to suggest that it cannot be contained by the artist's gaze. Its peach and burgundy shading pops against an azure blue sky, diminishing the human presence in the image. A man cloaked in green robes and a white turban, accompanied by his seated camel, gazes at the arch. In an



Figure 9. Menu Cover, “Libia – L’arco di trionfo sulla Nuova Litoranea,” “Libya – Triumphal Arch over New Litoranea,” in Lloyd Triestino Oceanliner menu series of Italian cities, Conte di Savoia ship edition. Veneziani, Genoa, Italy, 1936, 9 by 12 inches. (Archivio Storico Barilla, Parma, Italia).

interesting play of internal perspective, the man appears to be looking down one end of the Via Balbia, while his camel faces the other direction that runs to the sea, thereby emphasizing the new coastal road which the triumphal arch sought to celebrate.

Italo Balbo, the Governor of Libya, requested the construction of the real Marble Arch in recognition of his connection of the Italian colonies Tripolinia and Cyrenaica, an infrastructural triumph (Figure 10). Architect Florestano Di Fausto’s travertine stone-work recalled Roman masonry, and stood thirty-one meters high at the pinnacle, and 6.5 meters wide. A Latin inscription on the frontispiece read from Horace’s *Carmen Saeculare*,

OH KIND SUN

MAY YOU NEVER LOOK ON A CITY

GREATER THAN ROME.

Below the inscription sat a hollow, with a bronze statue of one of the Philaeni brothers. According to legend, the Philaeni were two Carthaginian brothers whose heroic self-sacrifice settled the ancient border dispute between the Carthaginians in western Libya, in Tripolitania, and the Greeks to the east, in Cyrenaica. The Marble Arch, with its



Figure 10. Photograph of the Marble Arch. Reparto Guerra/Libia-Regio Esercito – L'avanzata di alcune colonne motorizzate verso l'Egitto." August 2, 1940 Photo: RG0003434 (Archivio Luce, Rome, Italy).

inscription and statuary, was unveiled in 1937, in a lavish night ceremony attended by Benito Mussolini.

Opening the Marble Arch menu, we see that this menu follows the norms of other European and American steamship menus for the tourist class: the food list is divided by course, with options for appetizers, first and second courses, vegetable side dishes, and desserts.⁴⁵ The menu is written in Italian on the left, then translated into English on the right. Like the diplomatic menus, the options would have been broadly recognizable as Italian cuisine, albeit an Italian cuisine that used the north to stand for the whole of the country. But where the diplomatic menus were concerned with reassuring the attendees of their social status by offering them expensive foods, these steamship menus were concerned instead with underscoring a culinary version of Italian patriotism. The Rex steamship menu highlighted the *piatti italiani* through bold typeface, central placement, and sheer quantity, providing a culinary corollary to the Duce's politics of linguistic and alimentary autarky. It heralded a new kind of gastronomic nationalism, born in the world of the arts.

"Artusi's day," snorted F.T. Marinetti, "is over." The Futurist provocateur had called for the "total renewal of cooking" in his 1932 *Manifesto della cucina futurista*. He declared war against pasta for its role in diminishing male virility by making potential Italian soldiers sluggish and slow. Autarkic rice promised to slim Italian bodies, in preparation for battle.⁴⁶ He advocated for linguistic autarky in the kitchen, with a dictionary for new terms like *traidue* for the English sandwich and *consummato* for the French consommé. In the steamship menu, the treatment of translation highlights culinary autarky. Lighter typeface also draws attention the menu's autarchic dishes. Instead of a *primi* menu section full of pasta dishes, we see the euphemistic "Farinacei," or "Farinaceous" ("Starchy foods") Two of the four dishes feature rice, heavily promoted by the Fascist regime as a patriotic dish, and as a suitable substitute for wheat. Still, the menu goes to great lengths to emphasize the regional delights of Italian autarky. The Antipasto section proudly lists Italian cold cuts by geographic region, including prosciutto di San Daniele and salame di Brianza. Though the consumers of this menu were literally at sea, beyond the borders of their native Italy, this dish would instill

pride of country and imply through its deliciousness that eating autarkically is a pleasure rather than a sacrifice.⁴⁷

Colonial foods cannot be found until dessert, but here the menu practically insists that the Italian colonists try their first banana while on board. “Bananas Beignet” and “Frittata di Banana” are featured among the options. Why such attention to a non-autarkic food? Because bananas are Italian if one considers the Somali plantations to be part of Italy, as the Fascists did in 1938 when this menu was printed.

The designers of both the Conte di Savoia and Rex steamship menus take a common approach to their content. Cover art reframes North African monuments as Italian ones, as in the “Axum-Leptis Magna-Rodi” photocollage featuring the Stele of Axum. Other steamship menus celebrated new Fascist monuments in North Africa, as in the Conte di Savoia’s “Libia – L’arco di trionfo sulla Nuova Litoranea” menu cover. Inside, menu content shows that Italian preparations prevailed, with a few North and East African ingredients, like dates and bananas, added to Italian desserts, like *millefoglie*, but North and East African recipes are absent. The cultural primacy of French cuisine, predominant in Italian fine dining since the eighteenth century, still marks many preparations. These steamship menus primed Italian colonists, while en route to the new Ethiopian settlements, to view East African foodways in terms of raw ingredients that could be bent toward Italian purposes. In Asmara, steamship cuisine inspired the Ditta Ghidoli e Marchi to produce *Vino Rex*, made with Italian grapes grown in Eritrea.⁴⁸ Disregarding East African culinary traditions en route to empire would have primed colonists to ignore local recipes on their arrival.

The Pioneer’s Banquet and the Bank of Rome: Myths of Plenty on Colonial Settlements

Menus used aboard Mediterranean steamships inevitably conditioned menus used in the colonies themselves.⁴⁹ Italian business and infrastructure (ships, banks, and the like) invested in food production and trade, meaning that quotidian colonial rule lay with private industry supporting the Italian government’s goals for an agriculturally productive empire. The Bank of Rome bankrolled regime projects in East Africa, like the new National Afterwork Club for Italian laborers on Viale Tevere in Addis Abeba.⁵⁰ The bank-rolling Fascist empire in East Africa opened new client bases for the Bank of Rome. The Bank’s 1935 promotional pamphlets called on Italians to “Subscribe! Your funds are destined for our Colonies and for our work.” The cover cast colonization as a construction project, with a white man in a pith helmet (Figure 11). He holds a set of shovels, their handles resembling a *fascio*. His muscular arms recall Gino Boccasile’s body part-based graphic designs. It is half Fascist imperial propaganda, and half Banco di Roma private industry advertisement. Sign-up fees and interest rates paid for the government projects in East Africa, and for new satellite banks as well.⁵¹ By 1937, the second year of Fascist empire, Banco di Roma banks could be found in each East African capital (Asmara, Addis Ababa, and Mogadishu). In Eritrea, satellite banks served Massawa and Assab. The Amara region of Ethiopia hosted three (Dessìè, Gondar, Combolcià), Galla-Sidama four (Dembi-Ddollo, Gimma, Goree, Lechemtti, Gambela) and Harar three (Dire-Daua, Giggiga, and Harar itself). In Harar as well as other Banco di Roma company towns, the bank funded the National Afterwork Clubs that in turn



Figure 11. Bank of Rome promotional pamphlet, “Sottoscrivete! I vostri denari sono destinati alla difesa delle nostre Colonie e del nostro lavoro,” “Subscribe! Your funds are destined for our Colonies and for our work.” Rome. October 1935, Arti Grafiche P. Casetti & C. Roma, 5 by 7 inches. Accession: XC2014.12.12.24.2 (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, Florida).

provided regime-approved entertainment for Italian affiliates living on these Ethiopian settlements. Administrative Delegate of the Bank of Rome, Grand Official Giuseppe, Pietro Veroi, provided the funding to open the “Lucietta Veroi,” the first Dopolavoro Aziendale business group in this Ethiopian city. It was at these events that colonists gathered to eat and drink as a group.

On November 27, 1937, Harar *dopolavoristi* were invited to a “Convito del pioniere,” a pioneer’s feast. Conviviality linked the bank’s presence in Ethiopia with good works. The menu opened with a welcome to the colonists, “Welcome! This happiest of events will remain in the hearts which are the fount of good and esteemed works.” The banquet celebrated an art show held that day: paintings, drawings, and photographs of Ethiopia, an even mix of women and men in the Harar Dopolavoro group.

Roman ingredients and recipes mark this Harar menu. After all, Banco di Roma subsidized the colonial settlement where this banquet took place. Diners began with the

prosciutto from the Roman hills, and then another Roman dish, *stracciatella ciociara*, an egg and chicory soup. Wines included a Tuscan Chianti and a Passito Isolano. The menu followed through on the regime's autarkic mandate for Italian foods marked by regional origin. As shown by the earlier menus examined here, wine was part of Ethiopian foodways prior to the arrival of the Italian colonists. But when phylloxera killed these local varieties, Fascist agronomers introduced *vitus vinifera* at Dukam. The varietal took root in the local wine culture, and later provided the base grape for the Guder and Dukam wine brands. The Italian regional origins work like brand names, in that they denote the food's preparation styles as well as their origins. Roman dishes, here, promoted Roman identity among Italian colonists through foods. As David Horn characterized similar phenomena, "The individual and the social were thus to be linked in a process of normalization."⁵²

Ethiopian provincial branding also plays a role in the selections for this menu. Just as this menu uses Roman foods to center the many Italian identities of the colonists, so too does it use Harar to brand the Banco di Roma Harar settlement as a key site within the broader geographic context the Ethiopian territories. Perhaps the most striking inclusion for the "Convito del pioniere" regional selections is the main dish: Harar chicken. Although this nomenclature could indicate either the chicken's origin or preparation style, the fact stands that the most important dish of the banquet was Ethiopian. One likes to imagine that Harar chicken refers to *doro wat*, the tasty on-the-bone chicken stew, made with eggs, onions, garlic, ginger, and clarified butter. Given that *doro wat* was a specialty of Gondor rather than Harar, the inclusion of this menu item could mean that cooks in new regions had adopted the dish for adaptation to their own regional tastes.

Even if the Harar chicken denoted ingredient origin alone rather than an Ethiopian recipe, this too would indicate that Ethiopian agriculture was beginning to shape Italian methods. Consider the imperial chicken coop. With straight angles, grids, and designated laying zones, rationality ruled the roost. Italian agronomers argued that the "irrationality" of native Ethiopian chickens like the Horro breed caused them to lay smaller eggs. They recommended that colonists raise Central Italian Livornos.⁵³ But rationalist policulture failed to consider the traits for which Ethiopian farmers bred the Horros. They cared less about egg size and yield, and more about the bird's vigor: its scavenging drive, disease and stress tolerance, and flightiness for escaping predators. These traits meant that while farmers might have had a smaller eggs, their chickens would continue living to produce eggs in the future.⁵⁴

Italian cookbooks and magazines on the continent offered recipes for East African ingredients, often tropical fruits. They might even feature in this menu's Dolce Imperial, the imperial desert. In interwar Italian cookery guides, East African recipes were practically non-existent. But here, in Italian colonial settlements, Ethiopian fruit and coffee receive similar parallel treatment to the Italian dishes. References to regionality – Roman prosciutto and wine from Chianti, Harari coffee and fruit from Cercer – are similarly marked. This menu suggests the possibility of East African recipe use on Italian colonial settlements, incorporating regional preparations of local ingredients.

Another menu, also from the Banco di Harar Dopolavoro group, shows the more casual, workaday side of the Banco di Roma Harar village restaurant on November 20, 1938, with a hand-written list of daily specials (Figures 12(a,b)),

Macedonia di frutta etiopica

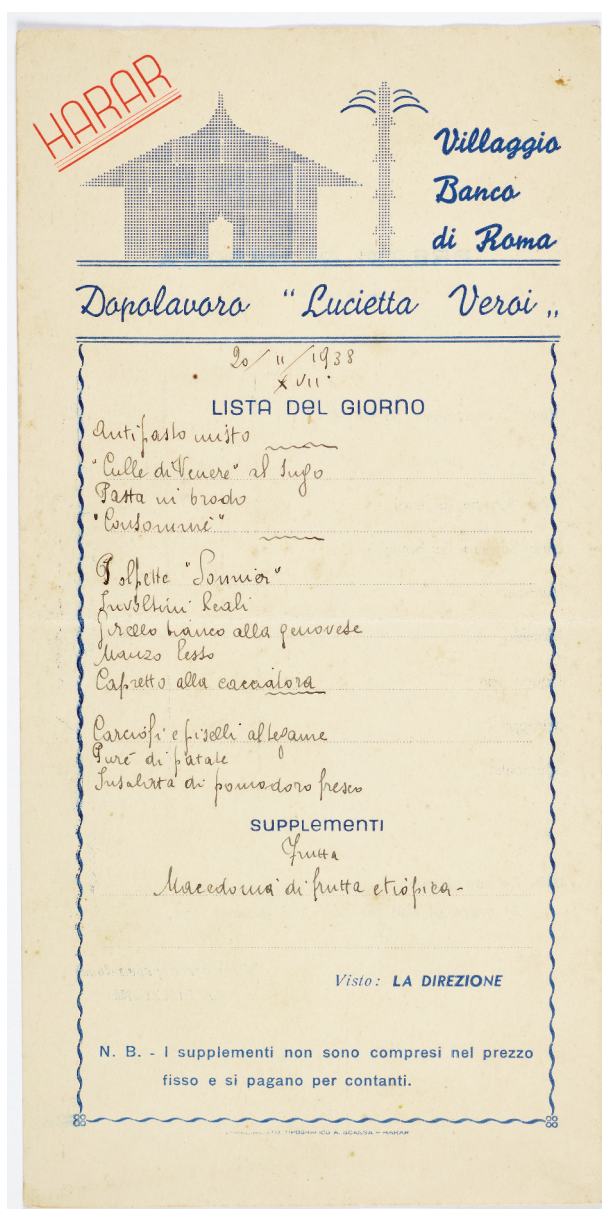


Figure 12. Menu, "Harar: Villaggio 'Banco di Roma' Dopolavoro "Lucietta Veroi" Lista del giorno," "Harar: Bank of Rome Village, Lucietta Veroi Afterwork Group Menu of the Day." Harar, Ethiopia. November 20, 1938, 4 by 7 inches.

If the Pioneer's banquet tells us what colonists ate for special occasions, then this settlement restaurant menu speaks to colonists' weekly eating habits. It takes a less prescriptive approach to marketing identity, and instead attests to how colonists' eating habits in East Africa differed from official recommendations. Here we see a much wider variety of ingredients. There are many kinds of vegetable dishes to choose from, including artichokes, peas, potatoes, and tomatoes, as well as different meats, like beef and goat.

PREZZI DI MESCITA

	bottiglia	bicch.
Vino Chianti (fiasco da litri 2) . . . L.	14	2
" (fiasco . . . 1) . . .	8	"
Vino comune (al litro)	2	"
Vino Barbera (la bottiglia)	14	2
Vermout	14	2
Marsala	18	2.50
Liquori vari	31	2
Sciroppi	"	"
Spumanti	"	"

N.B. Le consumazioni si pagano per contanti.
Si prega di non derogare alla disposizione.

Visto per approvazione
LA DIREZIONE

XC2014.12.12.24.4

Figure 12. Left: Menu front. Right: Menu reverse. Accession: ETHI XC2014.12.12.24.4 (Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, Florida).

The diversity of choice suggests that these ingredients were locally sourced, perhaps from the settlement or from Harar's famous markets. In kitchen courtyards in Harar, Italian families grew a wide variety of crops, including staples like potatoes, onions, and garlic, as well as sweet potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, lettuce, beets, cabbage, chard, broccoli, beans, artichokes, cardoons, fennel, celery, and cauliflower.⁵⁵ They also experimented with growing East African fruits, starting with fruits shared by the Italian diet, like grapefruit and *cedri*. To these, they often added bananas and papayas as well.

This menu speaks to the ways that national cuisines change when they travel, and how people chose when to try something new. Tropical fruits like bananas and papayas, along with coconuts and dates, were among the first and mostly East African foods to be adopted by Italians. Why? First, they are sweet, a base flavor that many easily accept. Sour, spicy, bitter, and meaty foods are more likely to be acquired tastes. Second, fruit salad is easy to prepare. Cooks do not need to learn new preparation styles or techniques. Finally, fruit fits into previous Italian culinary traditions, wherein exotic things appear in dessert courses first. Having already eaten one's fill, the dessert course provides a place to try something new without the risk of going hungry if one the new dish is off-putting.

Menu order matters because successive courses accomplish different purposes. Appetizers whet the appetite, exciting the diner for the meal to come. The Pioneer's Banquet menu opened with Roman cold cuts and a soup, signaling themes of regional Italy as home, even though the colonists living at this settlement hailed from across the peninsula. Next, the main course fills their stomach. Here, the menu proposes a regional Ethiopian recipe centered on chicken, a familiar autarkic meat in Italy. The menu takes an imperial approach to the recipe. It absorbs some elements of regional foodways even as it rewrites their geography for a colonial audience. Finally, the meal concludes with dessert and coffee. These final selections mirror the appetizer both in their small physical size and their intense emotional aftertaste. Here, we see *la cucina coloniale* at work. In all three menus, luxurious Ethiopian raw ingredients like fruit and coffee are prepared according to Italian tastes and styles. These menus show how colonial thinking operated through cuisine, and as promotion for the Italian business interests that subsidized the settlements. Desserts seal meals into memory, retained long after the dishes have been cleared away.

Far-Right Food Politics Today

In her much-cited *New Yorker* article, Ruth Ben-Ghiat asked "Why are there so many Fascist monuments still standing in Italy?"⁵⁶ For many years, the Stele of Axum featured on the Rex steamship menu cover stood in front of the Food and Agriculture Association offices in Testaccio, even as UN delegates inside discussed the Ethiopian famines of the early 1980s. After protracted negotiations, the stele was finally repatriated to the northern highlands in 2006, now the site of annual Ethiopian independence day festivals with a culinary component. Whereas the Stele of Axum had a long pre-Fascist history that called for conservation, the Marble Arch in Libya was a purely Fascist construction. In the late 1960s, Muammar Gaddafi rose to power on a platform of Arab nationalism and a cult of personality. On October 7, 1970, he proclaimed a new holiday, "Vengeance Day." The Libyan government enacted legislation to reduce Italian influence. The government expropriated all Italian-owned assets and expelled the 12,000 member Italian community from the country along with the smaller community of Libyan Jews. To cement the proclamation with a spectacular display, Gaddafi ordered the Marble Arch to be laid with sticks of dynamite. Explosions lit the sky, and the arch was demolished. The event may have had a personal resonance for Gaddafi. As a small child, Gaddafi lived near Sirte, an Italian administrative center during the North African campaign. During the Italian invasion of 1911, Abddessalam Bouminyar, his paternal grandfather, was killed.

At present, Italy grapples with its Fascist past, even as it contends with the current rise of populist nationalism. Debates regarding African migration and European citizenship have taken culinary form in restaurant menus. The overseas passage from Tripoli to Lampedusa echoes the steamship voyages made during the years of Fascist East African empire, and the disastrous attempt to establish Ethiopia as the breadbasket of Italy. The current rise of culinary nationalism, then, presents us with the legacy of Italy's colonial experiment: a food-focused variant of what Stephanie Malia Hom has termed "empire's mobius strip."⁵⁷

Examining the menu-based legislation of what dishes are permissible as part of the Italian culinary canon helps to shed light on abstract questions of transnationality, and how ingredients and preparations transform a strange country into a person's home. In January 2009, the Tuscan town of Lucca banned the establishment of new ethnic restaurants as a means to defend traditional Lucchese food and foodways. In words that echoed the rhetoric of Benito Mussolini,⁵⁸ city council members defended the move by invoking an idealized national past, one that cast Italy as rural, religious, socially homogenous, and, perhaps most importantly, politically conservative.⁵⁹ Thus began the so-called Kebab Wars,⁶⁰ a modern-day incarnation of the Duce's alimentary "battles" for autarchic foods like grain, bread, and rice. Extreme right-wing groups began to adopt Lucca's culinary conservatism as a cultural symbol for neo-Fascist and post-Fascist ideology.⁶¹ Political contagion spread the concept across Northern Italy through a potent blend of mass media and personal promotion. Spurred on by his constituencies, Triestine mayor and Lega Nord member Enzo Bortolotti passed an ordinance requiring all Middle Eastern and African restaurants serving the twelve thousand inhabitants of Azzano Decimo to serve a selection of Italian dishes.⁶² On menus, Bortolotti required the inclusion of three regional dishes of Friuli-Venezia Giulia: *polenta*, *brovada* (sauerkraut), and *musetto* (soft salame). Minister of Agriculture Luca Zaia then blessed the bans. In Lucca, and in other Northern Italian towns this new legislation applied almost exclusively to Middle Eastern and African restaurants. By contrast, these townships welcomed Asian, American, and Western European cuisine, as evidenced by the plethora of new Japanese sushi spots, American burger joints, and French *creperies* that opened in these townships throughout 2009 and 2010. Culinary nationalism became a common way for right-leaning politicians to frame the question of what should be considered traditional Italian food.⁶³

In 2015, Italy's colonial past in North and East Africa was again in the news, as 1.3 million people attempted the dangerous overseas Mediterranean passage from Libya to Italy, the largest exodus since World War II. Hundreds died in shipwrecks off the coast of Lampedusa. Asylum seekers who arrived safely on Italian shores faced lengthy delays in detention centers awaiting legal processing. La Lega (then Lega Nord) famously cast their opposition to immigration in culinary terms in their 2012 campaign poster, "Yes to polenta, no to couscous." It was, to use Fabio Parasecoli's term, a gastronativist response to the early years of Europe's so-called migrant "crisis." At the same time, Barilla responded to Italy's changing demographics with a new product line aimed at the influx of multi-lingual consumers. Their signature product? Quick-boil couscous, with cooking instructions in Italian, French, and Arabic. Far-right groups like La Lega, Casa Pound, and Forza Nuova began to use local hunger relief as opportunities to promote Italian nativism. Supermarket parking lots provided Italian-only food distribution points, marked in red "Prima gli Italiani," "Italians first."

Tendencies toward Italian culinary conservatism also pervade liberal food ideologies. The Slow Food movement, led by Carlo Petrini, emerged out of the left-leaning Arci-Gola group in the 1980s as a critical response to the Americanization of Italian foodways, specifically to the opening of a McDonalds at the base of Rome's Spanish Steps. UNESCO heritage campaigns aim to protect the authenticity of Italian espresso in global markets. The consistency of the Italian culinary canon is a mark of pride – or, with an official stamp, even a trademark of pride.

But the designation of cuisine as ethnic is by no means stable across time and place. Centuries of Arab influence in Southern Italy marked regional cuisines their so heavily that, to give but one example, the North African origins of Sicilian desserts (*gelato*, *granita*) and their ingredients (saffron, almonds, oranges, rose flower water) came to be considered local foodways rather than imported ones.⁶⁴ Many ingredients that characterize traditional Italian cuisine arrived from the Americas on Old World shores at the relatively late date of 1504.⁶⁵ Adoption was slow: tomatoes were considered poisonous, and nearly two centuries passed before they became key ingredients in classic sauces like *bolognese*, *arrabbiata*, and *puttanesca*. Less than one hundred years ago, the Fascist regime pushed Italian consumers to embrace colonial food stuffs like Somali bananas and Ethiopian coffee, if not the East African preparations for these foods. Despite the hysteria engendered by the Kebab Wars, Italian food history attests to the fact that Middle Eastern and African flavors and recipes have been part of the peninsula's culinary canon since before Italy was a unified nation. As this exploration of *la cucina coloniale* has shown, menus provide key scripts that evidence constructions of culinary nationalism, constructions that continue to influence the relationship between the diets, cultures, and politics of Africa and Europe.⁶⁶

Antipasto misto
 “Culle di Venere” al sugo
 Pasta in brodo
 Consomme
 Polpette “Sonnina”
 Involtini reali
 Girello bianco alla Genovese
 Manzo lessato
 Capretto alla cacciatora
 Carciofi e piselli al tegame
 Puré di patate
 Insalata di pomodoro fresco

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. Composite description of an Italian legionnaire's dining experiences of the interwar Rex passage from Italy to Eritrea is based on descriptive passages in Alberto Martino, "Partenza da Napoli." 1938–1946. Archivio Diaristico Deposito Permanente 19. 554 pages.
2. For comparative accounts of steamship cuisine served on the Italy-East Africa liners, see "Special Class on Rex and Savoia Ends" and "A Tour of Ethiopia."
3. Scarpellini, *Food and Foodways in Italy*.
4. Ken Albala writes, "With a complete set [of historical menus], trends in taste preferences, the ways dishes wax and wane in popularity, the changing structure of courses within a meal, and even prices can be gauged over time. Menus will obviously reveal the availability of certain ingredients . . . Menus from famous dining spots, political banquets . . . can yield very specific information about a certain time and place" in "Analysis of Historic and Primary Sources," 188.
5. Flandrin, *Arranging the Meal*.
6. Weaver, *Culinary Ephemerata*.
7. Pearlman, *May We Suggest*.
8. See Rex Italian steamship menus analyzed by Michelle Kennedy in "Yesterday's Specials."
9. Parasecoli, *Gastronativism*.
10. Welch, *Vital Subjects* and Cassata, *Building the New Man*.
11. Miele, "Per un'archeologia."
12. Here Priscilla Ferguson cites her July 13, 1993 interview with chef-owner of L'Archestrate Alain Senderens, in "Eating Orders," 682.
13. Ge'ez, an Afro-Semitic script, is the written script system for both Eritrean Tigrinya and Ethiopian Amharic.
14. For additional discussion of East African feasting as a convivial means to exchange political information, see McCann, *Stirring the Pot*.
15. Massimo Zaccaria, Shirefaw Bekele, Chelati Dirar, and Alessandro Volterra analyze similar early-twentieth century Eritrean diplomatic feasts for their political content in their edited volume *The First World War from Tripoli to Addis Ababa*.
16. See Harold G. Marcus, cited in Jim McCann, *The Life and Times of Menelik II*, 223.
17. McCann, *Stirring the Pot*.
18. As McCann notes, "King Abba Jafar sent kerosene lamps, cloths for the tables, and special honey the color of the flowers of that region," 73.
19. McCann, *People of the Plow*.
20. Adi Ugri is the capital city of the Debub Region of Eritrea. The town's name derives from the high hill in the center of the city.
21. Horne writes, "Rather than purification, the goals of fascist demographic politics were social defense and multiplication; rather than selective breeding and sterilization, its means were improved hygiene, diet, and education." Horn, *Social Bodies*, 60.
22. *L'oltremare*, April 1935, 449.
23. Priscilla Ferguson characterizes the menu's political use of conviviality in broad terms, "Food is not so much a product as a process . . . that [can] create and sustain collective identity." Fergusson, "Eating Orders," 689.
24. Ferruccio laid out the 1920s statistics as a means of illustrating the supposed success of the Battle for Grain, continuing, "but since that time the imports have gradually decreased, so as to be able to consider, as it occurred in the years 1934, 1935 and 1936, almost nil. Also for maize, imports fell from 9 million quintals in 1928 to just over a million, as it was in 1936–37 and in the current year." Ferruccio, "I Problemi della Autarchia Alimentare," 1939, 7–8.
25. Messina, "Pasta in Local and Global Contexts."
26. By 1926–28, Italian pasta exports had fallen to 13,300 tons per year. See Rodanò 1935 and Chiapparino 1998, cited in Messina, "Pasta in Local and Global Contexts," 106.

27. Zaccaria further notes that the Eritrean government's largest concession was not infrastructure but rather raw goods. It promised to deliver the total weight of 750,000 kg of cattle per year. It was financially unsustainable, and Torrigiani was forced to close, suspended operations until 1926. At this later date, it reopened under a new name, the Caramelli Company. Figure cited by Zaccaria *Feeding the War*, 184.
28. Zaccaria, "Not a Hectare of Land."
29. Italian Ministry of Colonies, "Approvvigionamenti, consumi e contributi delle Colonie Italiane."
30. Istituto Coloniale Italiano 1920, 291.
31. When Italian strategies for animal husbandry depleted Eritrean livestock, the colonial powers turned toward Ethiopian stocks, setting rinderpest on its southward trajectory. By the end of the decade, the disease would decimate stock as far as South Africa. It took years for Eritrean stocks to recover. "La valorizzazione industriale," 261, cited in Zaccaria, "Feeding the War."
32. Zaccaria, "Feeding the War."
33. "They say [the local population] to plow lands that we want to leave fallow." "Il contributo delle Colonie alla madre Patria in guerra," 135–140, cited in Zaccaria, *Feeding the War*, 135–140.
34. Out of a total population estimated to be 300,000 to 350,000 people, over 10,000 adult Eritrean men formed the Italian Askari corps. Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*.
35. Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness*, 36.
36. Ibid., 46.
37. Larebo, *The Building of an Empire*.
38. Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness*.
39. Lusignani "Iniziativa Cerealicole," 19.
40. G.B. Lusignani, "L'Ente di Colonizzazione Romagna d'Etiopia," 19.
41. An October 1932 *Time* magazine article quotes a certain Ginlio Gatti-Casazza as saying, "I am sure all Italian people are proud of the creation of their skilled and artistic countrymen. Every part of the Rex was made in Italy!"
42. According to the October 1932 *Time* magazine article cited above, "Five thousand Italians ([stood] at Fascist salute on Genoa piers as the Rex sailed)."
43. See "Il personale di bordo sui piroscafi italiani."
44. Printed menus in working class bars and cafes, when they existed, typically were not printed in a series. Instead, a single printing sponsored by a Cinzano or Campari ad on the cover sufficed. See the Wolfsonian-FIU menu collection for further exemplars.
45. For comparative examples, see Kennedy, "Yesterday's Specials."
46. Marinetti and Fillia, *La cucina futurista*.
47. During the same year that this menu was produced, autarchy assumed a heightened importance for the Fascist regime. Sabato Visco, Professor of Physiology at the University of Rome, introduced the periodical *Autarchia alimentare*, blending scientific research with updates on government food policy and the new nutritional sciences.
48. *Guida Commerciale Eritrea*, 81.
49. See discussion of Italian and Eritrean foodways in Leo Mezzadri, "Turismo coloniale," 65–67.
50. Bank of Rome advertisement, Wolfsonian Institute, ITAL XC2014.12.12.24.1.
51. In 1935, new Banco di Roma clients paid their signup fee in installments, with thirty five lire required to enroll, then a second fee of the same amount in four months' time, plus a final twenty-five lire fee in eight months' time. With a minimum of ninety-five lire in the bank, clients would then receive five percent interest on their investment every year until 1956, at which point the bank rates would dictate new terms. Bank of Rome Promotional Pamphlet, 1935, Wolfsonian Institute, Miami, Florida: XC2014.12.12.24.2.
52. Horn, *Social Bodies*, 122.

53. Design differed from Italian models with the goal of using architecture to counterbalance perceived environmental deficiencies, deviations from the Italian norm: less water and more heat meant adding hydration tanks and extra roofing for shade. The problem is that northern Italians in Florence wrote the guides. If you asked someone from Puglia, this probably wouldn't have been a problem.
54. Lantini, "I Problemi della Autarchia Alimentare," 7–8. Today, Leghorns, originally from Liguria, are the global industry standard for their uniformity and large size.
55. For Laws of Ethiopian Farming, see: Istituto Agronomico per l'Oltremare, Florence, Italy: AOI Fasc. 1811, 1938/40, Ispettorato Agrario del Harar, "Disposizioni su orti e frutteti."
56. Ben-Ghiat, "Why are so many Fascist Monuments Still Standing in Italy?"
57. In her book of the same name, Stephanie Malia Hom refers to the Tripoli, Libya to Lampedusa, Italy overseas Mediterranean passage as an example of "Empire's Mobius Strip," wherein the first colonial migratory flow reverses direction in a second flow in the decades hence.
58. Lucca city council member Filippo Candelise was particularly widely quoted in both Italian and international papers. He attempted to cast this culinary protectionism not as anti-foreigner, but rather as pro-Italian. As he put it, "We absolutely reject the racist label. We simply want to preserve our cultural and historical identity." See Donadio, "A Walled City in Tuscany Clings to its Ancient Menu."
59. This idea is highly problematic for several reasons: first, the exact date and location of this "past" is hazy. Because the "past" could potentially date to so many different time periods and geographic regions, its material dimensions defy historical specificity. One might say that the idealized national past exists in the Italian language's imperfect tense, indicating an ongoing action, to be repeated but not completed. Indeed, this trope is also problematic due to its own repeated past uses: Benito Mussolini frequently relied on this "past" to promote Fascist social policies ranging from pronatalism to racial law during the late 1930s.
60. *Il corriere della sera* in Italy, *The Guardian* in England, and *The New York Times* in the United States used this moniker to refer to the Northern Italian anti-ethnic restaurant legislation throughout 2009.
61. Many of these political officials affiliated with the far right-wing group Lega Nord. I refer to these groups as both neo-Fascist and as post-Fascist to reflect the debate that swirls around the use of the terms both in Italian media and amongst Lega Nord members themselves. Generally speaking, Lega Nord members refer to themselves as "post-Fascist" rather than "neo-Fascist" due to the group's history. Under founder Umberto Rossi, Lega Nord took pains to distance themselves from explicitly neo-Fascist groups, such as the Movimento Sociale Italiano and the Aleanza Nazionale. Under the current leader Matteo Salvini, they have become more closely tied with Marine Le Pen's French far-right group, the Front National. Contemporary scholars of Fascism, such as Mabel Berezin, have acknowledged the debate and typically affix the term "neo-Fascist" to Lega Nord members. Carlo Ruzza and Stefano Fella investigate the contemporary tension between the terms in *Re-Inventing the Italian Right*.
62. For more information on Lega Nord's construction of traditional Italian culture, see Stampino, "Forgetting the Mediterranean."
63. Giani, "Niente couscous se non c'è la polenta."
64. To offer another example: what could be more Italian than an espresso or a cappuccino? And yet Italy traditionally imported almost all of its coffee from sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Ethiopia, a colonial territory during Italy's Fascist period.
65. For a history of how the Age of Exploration impacted Western European food and foodways, see Allen, *In the Devil's Garden*.
66. Here I am grateful to Elizabeth A. Zanoni for her insightful thoughts in formulating these research contributions.

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