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Producing consumers: Gendering Italy through food advertisements

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Introduction

Italian women historically manifested their power in the family through food.¹ Serving food, rather than food itself, held gendered connotations, in that domestic labor equated to women's work. Specific foods, like jam or beer, were gender-neutral. But in the late 1950s and early 1960s, seismic social and economic waves rocked these traditional modes of culinary expression. As employment surged, affordable public housing expanded and the cities filled. As Eric Hobsbawm put it, the Economic Boom allowed the average Western European citizen "to live as only the very wealthy had lived in his parent's day."² Mass production provided the means for consumers to satisfy their every material desire. But this cultural pivot prompted questions as well as solutions. Because women's work could now imply labor in both the public and private spheres, traditional notions of womanhood became destabilized. Food advertising thus emerged in response to the pervasive question: what observable qualities can we use to delineate female and male gender? With this cultural framework in mind, we see that this media form eases social anxieties unique to a certain time and place by establishing and communicating new definitions of gender, and that this move serves as a novel means to sell food products.

Let's turn to our specific case study. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the female readership³ of the Italy's longest-running⁴ cooking magazine,

La Cucina Italiana, would have noticed a decisive shift in the periodical's advertising. Economic Boom⁵ ads ceased to hawk basic products such as rice, pasta, and margarine for their capacity to cheaply fill the belly, abandoning a once common refrain from the leaner years of the early twentieth century.⁶ In lieu of addressing their audience as a hungry monolith, advertising agencies began to divide and conquer. For the first time in *La Cucina Italiana*'s history, the majority of food advertising campaigns directly invoked the consumer's gender.⁷ Resulting ads highlighted how a single foodstuff influenced female and male physiology in different ways. Economic Boom food advertisements from this popular magazine both reflected and affected cultural changes in the conception of gender in Italy. Among these, ads featuring women vividly evoke concern for food's effect on personal appearance. Ads featuring families similarly highlight this issue for mothers and daughters, but point to the importance of product flavor and digestibility for husbands and sons. Because these advertisements portray consumer food requirements and desires (such as caloric content, taste, and nutritional value) as being fundamentally distinct for male and female bodies, I argue that they not only evoke preexisting conceptions of gender division, but actually work to create new, biologically-determined differentiations between male and female consumers.

Context

Vibrancy and rarity characterize previous scholarship of twentieth century Italian mass media. Karen Pinkus' *Bodily Regimes* mapped the popular iconography of Fascist period tropes. Analysis of historical marketing techniques grounds Adam Arvidsson's *Marketing Modernity*. David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle's ethnographic inquiries flesh out the consumer's reception of mass media themes. Few researchers examine advertising to elucidate Italian culture, and none focuses exclusively on food advertisements.⁸

In addition to incorporating novel materials, this study also builds on pre-existing scholarship by incorporating techniques from multiple disciplines. Literary and art criticism unlock meaning in advertisements as well as highbrow works. Historical analysis and theoretical exposition contextualize and extend the significance of recurring themes. While many scholars only employ methods common to their respective fields, I use a spectrum of techniques to analyze Italian food advertisements. This novel, hybrid approach permits wide application of the study's conclusions.

Examining how a subset of advertisements represent gender division reveals place- and period-specific cultural assumptions that anchor this expansive theme. Kathleen LeBesco, Peter Naccarato, and Victoria De Grazia

have explored mass media's role in American and Italian gender construction at the theoretical level, pointing to iconic examples to illustrate broad cultural currents. Their foundational work provides the conceptual framework used here. Specificity guides this study; one cannot trace the genesis or apotheosis of gender division in mass media to Italy, a single country, or the Economic Boom, a discrete time period. Bearing this in mind, I selected advertisements that a) appear in multiple magazines over a multi-year period and b) illustrate the iconic themes emerging from a corpus of well over 2,000.⁹ Frequency and intensity, shown in the repetition of specific words and images, helped me to identify the motifs for analysis. For this reason, this chapter seeks first to identify emergent themes associated with gender division, such as the *linea* (female figure), measurement tools, and the dinner table as a place of battle or judgment, and then to explain their social significance within the context of Economic Boom Italy.

Overview

To open this chapter, I analyze four food advertisements from the 1930s showing women alone, and in a family context. Most food ads appearing in *La Cucina Italiana* from the 1930s to the early 1940s¹⁰ show the product and brand name, perhaps accompanied by simple graphics related to the food, such as a steaming plate of pasta. When ads do include people, they tend to highlight profession or vocation rather than familial roles. Chefs and nuns far outnumber housewives. As such, the proliferation of women and families in 1950s advertisements indicates the ascending visibility of the housewife as a cultural figure as well as increasing commercial focus on private family lives. In Series 1, the first two ads sell beer and jam to women by emphasizing the pleasures of the product (refreshment, taste, varied flavors) and its positive effects on the body (cooling, nourishing). The advertisements in Series 2 hawk pasta to families. Buitoni's *spaghetti al sugo* (spaghetti with sauce) ad showcases a variety of body types, all produced by consuming the same pasta. A man takes on the traditionally female work of food preparation, with no resulting loss in masculinity. Barilla hawks its product based on its disparate effects on different family members. Age and strength, not gender, differentiate the bodies in this ad. Focus on food's taste, nutrition, and capacity to sustain both young and old characterizes many food ads published prior to the upsurge of mass consumption in the late 1950s. Such a frame serves to cast the gender divisions of Economic Boom food advertisements into sharp relief, rather than to diagnose the social significance of the body's treatment in early twentieth century food advertising.

Gender division blooms into a widespread advertising trope for comestibles during the late 1950s and early 1960s. To demonstrate how advertisers distinguish between female and male bodies in both image and text, I will give a visual tour of two sets of thematically grouped advertisements from *La Cucina Italiana*. In Series 3, the first three ads center on women, and highlight the supposed needs and wants of the female body. These advertisements use imagery of scales, measuring tapes, and textual references to lightness and thinness to suggest that the most important characteristic of women's food is low caloric content. Food's primary value lies in its capacity to restructure the female body.

The second set of advertisements from the Economic Boom consists of family portrayals. The two ads in Series 4 showcase the differing needs and wants of female and male family members. They do not approach the consumer as a neutral entity, or the family as a holistic group. Instead, they target their arguments. As in Series 3, these ads point to the product's ability to slim the female body. They assign importance to taste and ease of digestion to male bodies. But because all of these ads address a female audience, they cast the potential satisfaction of the male body through product purchase in terms meant to appeal to women. This move reveals the supposed emotional cravings of a particular time and place: a tasty meal for the husband leads to compliments, or at least the absence of criticism, for the wife. If both father and son enjoy smooth digestion, then their character changes as a result. For male bodies, food's effect on behavior is the major selling point. These ads suggest that in Economic Boom period Italy, pervasive principle held that women wanted to use food both to slim their bodies and to improve their male family members' comportment. But more broadly, the changing gender norms promoted by these advertisements speak to national shifts in Italian domestic life, as writ in the idealized representations of Italy's private sphere.

Series 1: 1930s food ads with women

"August Shivers"

Early twentieth-century food advertisements aimed at women focused on the agreeable effects food had on the body, as this beer ad from the August 1930 edition of *La Cucina Italiana* demonstrates. A consortium of beverage companies cooperated to produce this ad, part of a series to promote beer regardless of brand. I will refer to this ad by the descriptive title "August Shivers."¹¹ In 1930s Italy, both genders enjoyed beer, as evidenced by the neutral Italian subject "Chi" (lit. "the one who") in the campaign slogan "He



FIGURE 8.1 *Collective Beer Advertising Campaign “Chi Beve Birra Campa Cent’Anni,” “August Shivers,” Rome, 1930 (La Cucina Italiana [August 1930]).*

who drinks beer lives for a hundred years.” The accompanying portrait of transgenerational beer drinking miniaturizes another ad image in this series. In striking contrast with Economic Boom food ads, including those for beer, this ad copy argues that the product ameliorates the woman’s experience of consumption. Later ads for foods and beverages contend that their sundry

products improve women's corporeal aesthetics by decreasing body size and weight. Regardless of time period, food's effect on the body remains central to the arguments in favor of product purchase. Both image and text highlight the delights of drinking cold beer to refresh the body in summer heat. The text reads,

A shiver in the heat: in this torrid August it is a true joy to quench one's thirst with beer. It is as though a reviving shiver of air gathers at the edge of the glass. Beer is truly a light, healthy, delicious beverage that refreshes and gives pleasure. To feel it go down the parched ways of the throat seems like being reborn. It quenches and does you good at any time. Drink Italian beer.¹²

The presence of a woman next to the ad copy combined with ad placement in a magazine of largely female readership mark women as this ad's intended audience. Yet the gender-neutral tone of the arguments for beer drinking could apply to both women and men. Quenching thirst and cooling the throat to provide relief from heat constitute gender-neutral bodily changes. Beer affects one body part in particular, the *gola* (throat). "Inner" body parts such as this point to commonalities between female and male bodies, whereas visible, gendered parts, such as breasts or the waist, highlight bodily differences.

Along these lines, the ad presents an image of a female body that suggests more overlaps between female and male bodies than divergences. The broad torso, trim body, and upright posture of this figure render it gender-neutral from neck to the knees. Gendered hourglass dimensions and stereotypically feminine facial features, such as the pronounced eyelashes and lips omnipresent in later ads, are notably absent. Clothing and accessories (skirt hem, necklace, bonnet, heels, parasol) and fashion-plate pose mark this silhouette as female. In this ad, outer accoutrements mark gender, rather than features of the body.

The ad copy frames beer's benefits to the female consumer in terms of physical satisfaction. Beer is a "joy" to drink because it offers "pleasure" by quenching thirst. In describing cool shivers emanating from the lip of the glass, the ad elicits vicarious sensory enjoyment of beer. The bolded text, "A shiver in August," points to the particular loveliness of this sensation during summer months. *Leggera* (light) and *sana* (healthy) signify beer as an ideal beverage to combat heat. With the onset of the Economic Boom, these adjectives connote a different goal: maintenance of low body weight. In the 1930s beer "does one good" (*fa bene*) by refreshing the female body. By the 1950s, ads deploy these same words to suggest that their product slims the body. From the interwar years to the Economic Boom, the same words in food ads

evoke noticeably different aims for female bodies, suggesting the creation of new, biologically determined conceptions of gender. These new images worked to naturalize gender difference at the level of the cell, suggesting that female and male bodies not only looked different on the outside, but also worked differently on the inside. A person's gender, they suggested, ultimately controlled bodily processes like digestion, vitamin absorption, and fat storage. To understand why ads might have introduced representations of bodily gender difference during the Economic Boom period, one need only consider the fact that the increased potential for employment unevenly affected women and men, offering more and better opportunities for work for the latter group than the former.¹³ As such, these new representations may have been attempts to explain, rather than to create, a new cultural phenomenon: the rise of the company man and the housewife.¹⁴

"Bride and Bonnet"

Cirio, purveyor of preserved foods, produced a striking advertisement aimed at newly married women for the October 1931 issue of *La Cucina Italiana*. As with "August Shivers," the ad "Bride and Bonnet" hawks its product for its effects on the female body. Although concern for pleasure remains present, arguments for the product's nutritional benefits predominate. The ad's key image depicts a beautiful young woman's face, her hands folded under the right cheek to partially reveal a baby bonnet. Rendering of her classically female facial features suggests aesthetic styles of the day: softly curled blonde hair, plucked eyebrows in half-moon arches, as well as visible eyeliner and lipstick mark her as a savvy consumer of popular 1930s beauty products. Though figureless in the sense that we do not see her body, she constitutes an aspirational figure. The suggestive presence of the baby bonnet coupled with the omission of the woman's body below the neck evokes the idea that a baby may be "present" in this ad as well. At the very least, the image of the bonnet and extensive textual discussion of the *nascituro* (baby-to-be) indicate that the effects of the product on both the woman's and the future baby's body provide motives for buying Cirio jam.

Dense text accompanying this image focuses on the female body in terms of its abilities and capacities during pregnancy. The opening phrase frames the consumption of Cirio jam as a means for women to increase their vitamin intake, and thus produce hale and hearty children, "You know to nourish yourself well if you want to give birth to strong, healthy babies." Physical symptoms accompanying pregnancy emerge in graphic details rarely used in contemporary Italian advertising, let alone in Economic Boom ads. An unstinting narrative of morning sickness' effects on the



FIGURE 8.2 Cirio, “Bride and Bonnet,” Rome, 1931 (La Cucina Italiana [October 1931]). Courtesy of Gruppo Conserve Italia.

female body—lack of appetite (*inappertenza*), irrepressible vomiting (*vomiti incoercibili*), and convulsive states (*stati convulsivi*)—indicates that pregnant women in particular benefit from Cirio jam, as this product addresses their concomitant needs for flavor and energy. Adjectives describe the product as pleasing (*gradevole*) and varied and flavorful (*variato e gustoso*) to suggest an enjoyable dining experience that includes beneficial nutrients “capable of giving you strength at the same time.” In contrast to Economic Boom advertisements, this ad highlights high caloric content and added sugars as virtuous product attributes providing strength, rather than negative qualities triggering undesirably high body weight. In the 1950s, food ads aimed at expectant mothers shun such arguments—the social castigation associated with weight gain menaces even during pregnancy.

The text’s tone and content treat the jam’s ability to please the mother’s palate and nourish her developing baby as dual goals. We see this equanimity in the penultimate phrase: ten varieties of fruit type allow the mother to select “the fruit [she] likes best, day by day” and thus “fortify, through your own, the organism of the baby to come.” Providing aesthetic pleasure for the woman results in nourishment for the baby. So while Cirio jam contends that their product benefits pregnant, and thus definitionally female, bodies, the

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arguments made for taste and nutrition specifically address needs associated with temporary bodily state rather than gender.

Series 2: 1930s food ads with families

“A Surprise at Home”

While *La Cucina Italiana*'s readership skewed female almost from its inception, neutral address in articles from 1929 to 1931 suggest magazine editors assumed a mixed audience. The October 1929 Buitoni pasta advertisement “A Surprise at Home” portrays a family, but addresses the male demographic of *La Cucina Italiana*'s readership. The “surprise” of this ad turns on normative gender roles governing food preparation. Directly addressing men, who would likely identify with the tie-clad, would-be chef in the accompanying image, the ad copy exhorts, “Surprise your family members by demonstrating that you know how to perfectly prepare pasta without ever having been interested in cooking.” In the description that follows, Buitoni's ten-minute boil-in-a-bag dinner emerges as the means to “prepare a splendid pasta for four people better than the most expert cook.” The advertisement depicts the temporary assumption of stereotypically female food preparation work as a potential fount of affirmation for the male ego.

This product's merits for men lie in its flavor, ease of preparation, and capacity to impress the family—all arguments that 1950s ads use to entice female consumers to purchase products. The image and text clarify that this role shift does not threaten the consumer's masculinity. Ensclosed in the domestic sphere, the ad's protagonist gains his family's attention while maintaining a dominant familial role. The reedy wife holds the man's hat and jacket for him, her mouth open in astonishment, while the son arches his back to follow the culinary work taking place on the stovetop above. Turned away from the action, but with her eyes on the progress of this culinary experiment, the stout grandmother puts her hand on her hips, perhaps indicating frustration that a male family member has successfully usurped her domain for the evening. Contrast between the wife's beanpole frame and the grandmother's rounded figure serves to identify their familial roles. In other words, grandmothers and wives are definitionally stout and slim, respectively. This image suggests that differences in weight among female bodies correspond with age, rather than the consumption of particular products.

Clad in office attire and surrounded by family, the man maintains the traditionally male roles of breadwinner, husband, and father even as he engages in female work. All heads turn towards him as he lowers the package into



.... UNA SORPRESA A CASA!!

Sorprendete i vostri famigliari dimostrando che sapete preparare perfettamente la pasta asciutta senza esservi mai interessati di cucina.

Raggiungerete questo scopo e questa perfezione con la scatola di cottura per spaghetti Buitoni al sugo.

Per cuocere gli spaghetti basta tenere la scatola di cottura nell'acqua in ebollizione per dieci minuti. Il condimento è contenuto nel coperchio a doppio fondo.

Chiunque può preparare un'ottima pasta asciutta per quattro persone meglio del più esperto cuoco.

Si invia a richiesta prospetto dimostrativo.

SPAGHETTI BUITONI
AL SUGO
IN SCATOLA DI COTTURA

FIGURE 8.3 Buitoni, "A Surprise at Home," Rome, 1931 (*La Cucina Italiana* [October 1931]). Courtesy of the Historical Barilla Archive, Parma, Italy.

the ready pot. Although the text suggests that boiling Buitoni pasta provides the man with the additional role of chef, the image of the family gathered around a single pot on a small stove firmly grounds this particular act of food preparation in the private, domestic sphere even as the prepackaged product, as well as the ad itself, evokes the larger systems of food production and distribution that surround the home. The Italian family represented here thus stands as metonym for the shifting consumption patterns that occurred at the national level during the 1930s.¹⁵ As Carole Counihan has noted in *Around the Tuscan Table*, food preparation and the ability to please one's family provided women with a circumscribed form of power up to the industrial era. This ad, and the spectrum of emotions displayed by this family, evoked the first jolts of these economic and social shifts.¹⁶

“Everyone Benefits”

Prior to the Economic Boom, ads for pasta primarily categorized bodies based on age, strength, and activity level, as this Pasta Fosfina Barilla ad from the May 1937 edition of *La Cucina Italiana* demonstrates. I will refer to this ad as “Everyone Benefits.” The nutritional needs of the family



FIGURE 8.4 Barilla, “Everyone Benefits,” Rome, 1937 (*La Cucina Italiana* [May 1937]). Courtesy of the Historical Barilla Archive, Parma, Italy.

first emerge monolithically in the titular phrase, “Everyone benefits from eating Phosphorous Pasta,”¹⁷ and then individually in the product slogan, “Barilla Phosphorous Pasta gives strength to the weak, sustains the strong.” These claims work in combination: the family unit benefits from the product because the pasta aids strong and weak bodies alike. Further, it suggests a broader need to promote the Italian nation as strong at this particular historical moment, that is, on the eve of Italy’s formal entrée into World War II.

The ad catches this family mid-meal, with spoons raised to their lips. The matriarch gazes at the viewer, almost appearing to speak the bolded ad copy beside her head. Despite employing a rhetoric of biology to highlight the pasta’s nutritional benefits, the ad copy prescribes this product on the basis of bodily ailments rather than gender divisions. “Phosphorous is an indispensable nutrient for developing organisms, as those that must be defended from loss of strength caused by excessive work, prolonged nervous tension, sicknesses, etc.” The ad copy’s scientific tone flattens male-female distinctions, referencing “organisms” rather than gender-specific family titles. Relative robustness distinguishes between bodies. Bodily distinctions primarily focus on age and health. By contrast, pasta ads from the Economic Boom emphasize myriad, distinct biological effects of a single food product on the basis of gender.

Series 3: Economic boom food ads with women

“The Angry Scale”

Perhaps the Economic Boom triggered this shift: when Italy’s economy surged, proper nutrition became an expectation, not a goal. With the family’s survival assured, the consumer could select products to meet desires rather than needs. Now that the precondition of familial survival was easily met, desires ranging from delicious food to marital accord could afford to emerge. Near exclusive emphasis on the woman’s figure in these advertisements illustrates the intensity of this shift, as evidenced by the following advertisement.

Perhaps the most visually arresting example in this series is the advertisement for rice produced by the National Rice Board (*Ente Nazionale Risi*), which appeared in the March 1959 edition of *La Cucina Italiana*. The warlike declaration, “Rice defends the figure,” captions this emotionally drenched cartoon image. A glowering scale bends forward, pushing a bag of rice towards an abashed woman. The needle points skyward, indicating an inappropriately high, though numerically undisclosed, body weight. No clear quantitative boundary distinguishes heavy from light, leaving the reader



FIGURE 8.5 Ente Nazionale Risi, “The Angry Scale,” Rome, 1959 (*La Cucina Italiana* [March 1959]). Courtesy of Ente Nazionale Risi.

to question where she stands in the spectrum of bodily acceptability. In the ad, the woman's hand rises to her cheek in an expression of surprise and embarrassment. In this black-and-white image, darker shading on her cheek suggests a deep blush. The scale prescribes rice as a remedy for the woman's supposedly high weight. This visually arresting ad centers on the woman's miniscule waist, a fixed point in the swirl of temporarily frozen motion created by the scale's downward swoop and the voluminous eddies of the woman's skirt. Her exaggerated, hourglass figure would be unattainable for the readers of *La Cucina Italiana*. Because the ad provides a petite beauty to exemplify heaviness, it manufactures anxiety in the reader and creates demand for the product. An anthropomorphized scale, with its medical gaze, takes on the authoritative power of prescribing foods to reduce female body weight. Food serves as a change agent, rather than an element of nourishment or a source of pleasure. As such, this advertisement typifies the intense and exclusive attention that the National Rice Board devoted to the diminishing effect of rice on the female body. This gambit suggests an underlying assumption that among all possible bodily modifications achievable through foodstuffs, women most wanted to lose weight. The use of shame implies a further distinction: the motive for this change primarily lay in the woman's self-conception rather than in her relation to a broader audience.

"Margarine Scales"

Foglia d'oro margarine produced a similarly themed advertisement for the October 1959 issue of *La Cucina Italiana*. This ad employed the trope of the *linea* to sell its product, stressing margarine's slimming effect while omitting any mention of flavor. "Margarine Scales" features weight as the key motivating factor for product purchase in image and text. The ad's design renders the woman in the same scale as the tub of margarine, emphasizing her elfin proportions. She poses on a dinner plate, a measuring tape pulled tight around her diminutive waist. This platform rises gently above its neighbor, which supports the tub of margarine. Viewed in this way, the dinner plate morphs into a scale plate. The ad not only renders the woman and the margarine in the same scale, but also places them on the same measuring scale. Because she eats margarine, the woman's weight appears to plummet below that of the palm-sized product. Further emphasizing the theme of weight loss, the ad copy repeats the word light (*leggero*) twice. The text proclaims,

One acquires or loses the waistline at the table! But be careful! ... It's not what you eat that counts, but how you season. Quite so! Ask the doctor. If [everyone] ate without seasoning then no one would get fat! To eat well while



FIGURE 8.6 *Foglia d'Oro, "Margarine Scales," Rome, 1959 (La Cucina Italiana [October 1959]). Courtesy of Unilever.*

preserving the waistline one absolutely needs a light condiment, without heavy fats! The lightest condiment you could wish for is *Foglia d'Oro*.¹⁸

As with the National Rice Board ads, this ad copy adopts a bellicose tone. The dinner table becomes a battleground, where women win or lose the ideal *linea*. Weight and measurement determine victory in this arena. The exhortation to “ask the doctor” grants the medic, not the chef, authority to judge the merits of the ad’s claims. *Foglia d'Oro* sells its product based almost solely on the promise that it trims the female body. The scales, measuring tape, and nod to the doctor depict food consumption as an act requiring medical monitoring to ensure progress towards the goal of weight loss. Taste, cost, and convenience go unmentioned. Such a framework appears predicated on the assumption that food’s value for women lies solely in its biological capacity to diminish rather than nourish the body.

While Italian food advertising’s focus on female body size and weight predates the Economic Boom period, several key features of this trope are unique to the late 1950s and early 1960s. A noteworthy frequency and emotional intensity of weight loss edicts emerges in this period, as does an almost obsessive focus on the waistline. This new emphasis might be due to expanding American influence on Italian advertising during this period. In addition to products like Coca-Cola, Ritz crackers, and Kraft cheese that flooded the Italian market as a result of the Marshall Plan, wasp-waisted stars like Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell also constituted popular American exports during this period. Artistic composition consistently places the waist at the center of these ads. The predominance of measuring tapes and nipped dresses also highlight this part of the body. Measurement, in the form of medical opinion and devices, provides supposedly objective validation for the ads’ promises. These motifs coalesce around a single issue: quantitative information on the body leads to qualitative self-assessment. Food assumes a medicinal quality, in its ability to manipulate the terms of this equation. The trope of the table as a battleground pits women against food, with their waistline at stake in the skirmish.

Series 4: Economic boom food ads with families

“Well done! With Gradina.”

With the rise of consumerism, selecting among basic food products for their capacity to change the body provides a new way of constructing the self, with potent, emotional rewards. Series 3 visually and textually depicted the

...brava avevi ragione



ho pranzato bene
con *Gradina*



...sì, sono proprio soddisfatto... la bistecca era splendida: saporita, leggera, cotta a puntino; una vera delizia. E i pisellini non erano un sogno? Caro, c'è da ringraziare Gradina che ci dà una cucina gustosa e leggera... è un condimento ricco e squisito... vedessi che rendimento.

MARGARINA
Gradina
TUTTA VEGETALE

L.60 L'ETTO

È un nutrimento leggero. Gradina è composta esclusivamente di sottilissimi oli vegetali; sono esclusi i grassi di origine animale; ecco perché Gradina, usata da sola, dà a tutti i piatti una grande leggerezza e digeribilità.

È un alimento nutriente. Come gli altri grassi pregiati è una preziosa fonte di energia per l'organismo.

È un condimento ideale per i fritti, per i dolci, nell'arrosto, nella pasta, nella torta. È meravigliosa per verdure e salumi, spalmata sul pane, sulla tartina, sui toast, è una meraviglia squisita.

È UN PRODOTTO VAN DEN BERGH

FIGURE 8.7 Gradina, “Well done! With Gradina.” Rome, 1957 (*La Cucina Italiana* [February 1957]). Courtesy of Unilever.

emergent idea that food served as a powerful tool for women to sculpt the body and the self. Series 4 similarly suggests that food works as a tool that women can control to change bodily processes. In these advertisements, the nature of that change differs. Food's utility arises from its capacity to change the comportment of male family members, and thus to improve to female consumer's home life. First, let us consider "Well done! With Gradina," a February 1957¹⁹ margarine ad that parcels out product benefits according to the consumer's gender in a family setting. This advertisement suggests that Gradina margarine both satisfies the culinary desires of male bodies and enables female bodies to maintain trim figures. This portrayal suggests an underlying assumption that men and women judge the worthiness of a product by different criteria.

The ad highlights the product's benefits to both genders by alternating between male and female narratives. The voice of the husband splashes across the top of the image in a titular fashion, "... Well done! You were right ..." before continuing below the image "I ate well with Gradina." His compliments on his wife's cooking continue in italics in a smaller paragraph below. Two and a half lines in, the wife's voice interjects, "Sweetheart, Gradina is the one to thank." She continues her complimentary description of the product for the next two and a half lines of text. Three bullet points in neutral ad copy voice follow, outlining the virtues of Gradina in terms of its lightness, nutritional value, and versatility. The photographic image shows a family at the dinner table. The husband's back faces the viewer. By obscuring any identifying features, the ad allows the viewer to picture her husband in his place. This reader would likely identify with the wife, who has just won her argument for Gradina's superiority as a product by dint of a delicious dinner. And yet she appears subordinate, inclined toward her husband in a half-bow of thanks for his compliment. The realistically rendered scene takes place just after dinner. While the husband sits at the table with his newspaper half-open in his lap, the picture of relaxation, the wife and her daughter stand by the table clearing away the dishes. A smaller image in black-and-white photography reprises the image of the wife in an identical posture and smile, this time bent over the pans on a stove. According to her own objection in the text, the product rather than culinary skill has triumphed.

This image of male satisfaction points to the fact that advertisers assigned value to product taste primarily in the context of male consumers. The clean plates and the husband's bolded compliment point to male appreciation for the tastiness of the product, and define the wife's value by her ability to satisfy the male body with culinary prowess. In contrast to the ads analyzed thus far, this ad emphasizes the virtue of the product's lightness only secondarily. As the ad portrays the woman in a subsidiary position in imagery, the analogous subordination of the perceived needs of the female body in the ad

copy is not surprising. Only the wife and the ad copy speak of lightness, a product characteristic meant to appeal to the women. The three bullet points at the end appeal to women as well. None concern flavor, but rather how margarine affects the body by promoting weight loss and offering nutrition.

“A Court of Gourmets”

“Well done! With Gradina” suggests that one product can fulfill the separate needs and desires of female and male family members, but gender division in *La Cucina Italiana*’s October 1958 Sesia pasta ad “A Court of Gourmets” goes further. This advertisement highlights food’s supposed capacity to produce disparate biological effects on family members’ bodies in accordance with their gender. Rendered in pen and ink, the central image of this ad shows an elegant family seated at the dinner table. The eyes of two men, one elderly and one middle-aged, coolly assess a dish of pasta arriving at the table in the hands of a maid. A young boy and girl eagerly lean towards the serving plate. Only the matriarch in pearls looks directly out from the ad, as if to address the viewer with the bolded text above the image, “Every family is a court of gourmets!” The table is no longer the battleground of the “Margarine Scales” ad, but a courtroom where the family judges the matriarch’s culinary direction. As with “Margarine Scales,” the table emerges as an emotional fraught space. The multifaceted product promises to bring familial reconciliation and peace to the beleaguered woman. From this point, the ad copy switches to smaller text, and the narrative voice aligns more closely with the advertiser’s voice than the matriarch’s. References to the husband, daughter and son in the ad copy suggest the assumption that the reader is also a married woman with children. The paragraph below the familial scene evokes the intensity of their potential critique: “... of very exacting gourmets ever ready to criticize.” This ad promises, “Everyone will agree on Pasta Sesia,” because it can work on different bodies in different ways. The husband will digest better, which changes his character. Pasta Sesia makes him both “more serene and more active.” This pasta also affects the son’s comportment, causing him to study with greater application. As for the daughter, this product addresses purely physical concerns. Eating Pasta Sesia means that she won’t have to worry about the famous *linea*, or how this dish will affect her complexion (“your daughter will finally be able to eat without worrying about her figure and complexion.” How this product benefits the matriarch goes unmentioned, perhaps because the ad assumes that her aesthetic concerns overlap with those of the daughter. And of course, like the wife of the “Well done! With Gradina” ad, “A Court of Gourmets” suggests that pleasing the husband is the woman’s primary goal. By contrast, early twentieth century food ads

Ogni famiglia italiana è un tribunale
di buongustai!




... di buongustai esigenti
sempre pronti a criticare.
Ma un buon piatto di pasta
Sesia con Aleurone
metterà tutti d'accordo.
Signora, pensi anche lei la pasta Sesia:
non marito digerirà meglio
e sarà più sereno e attivo,
il suo bambino
studierà con maggior profitto,
sua figlia potrà finalmente mangiare
senza preoccuparsi della linea
e della carnagione.

- + digeribile
- + nutriente
- + saporita

Sp.A. Molino e Pastificio SESIA - VERCELLI

pasta **sesia** con aleurone

Integrate la vostra alimentazione con pane e grissini con aleurone!

FIGURE 8.8 Sesia, "A Court of Gourmets," Rome, 1958 (La Cucina Italiana [October 1958]). Courtesy of the Historical Barilla Archive, Parma, Italy.

showing the family portray her primary aim as providing nutritious food, and her secondary aim as providing a tasty meal. These objectives target the family unit as a whole, rather than the husband. Food advertisements began to allocate desires on a gendered basis. “A Court of Gourmets” demonstrates this phenomenon: while the familial tribunal may agree on the verdict, this ad suggests that each jurist responds to a separate argument. Monolithic claims branch into multidimensional appeals.²⁰

Conclusion

Economic Boom period *La Cucina Italiana* advertisements repeatedly emphasize different aspects of the same foodstuff, making separate appeals for women and men. Ads for rice, margarine, and pasta aimed solely at women contend that the lightness of these products helps to diminish the *linea* and aid with weight loss. When these ads address the needs of the family at large, the copy points to different product benefits for men, such as taste and ease of digestion. By purchasing one product, the consumer simultaneously but separately addressed male desire for taste and female desire for weight loss and a peaceful home life. As such, the food’s digestibility, nutritional benefits and taste are not collectively enjoyed by any one diner, but are rather divided out according to gender. Prior to the 1950s, ads such as “Everyone Benefits” also claimed that foods worked on different bodies in different ways, but highlighted age and health as distinguishing factors. Economic Boom period *La Cucina Italiana* advertisements show that in the 1950s, food emerges as a key site for the materialization and articulation of gender division in Italian mass media. Because food provides a concrete way to translate abstract ideas about gendered work, family structures, and national traditions into a set of concrete actions oriented around food preparation and consumption, Italian companies had to engage with questions of household norms in their advertising, making sense of the wave of economic affluence that inundated Italy during the 1950s, and the social changes that followed in its wake.

Using advertising from *La Cucina Italiana* to decipher this phenomenon allows for broad applicability of these deductions. In detailing the evocation and creation of gender division from a cultural perspective, ads provide three, key advantages over other types of materials. First, magazine advertisers made a conscious effort to construct new gender differentiations as a marketing tactic during the late 1950s. *La Cucina Italiana*’s ads played a decisive role in this construction, as Adam Arvidsson notes in *Marketing Modernity*.²¹ Extensive consumer research also went into the creation of these ads. As Marshall McLuhan admits in *Understanding Media*, “No group

of sociologists can approximate the ad teams in the gathering and processing of exploitable social data.”²² So, these ads show the foundation of preexisting societal attitudes and the emergent strata of new concerns. Finally, the atavistic punch of these specific ads evokes the aspirations and fears of the society that created them. At once didactic and dream inducing, they play a fairy tale-like role in Italy’s Economic Boom consumer culture.

Notes

- 1 Carole Counihan notes that Italian women traditionally “attained and manifested” identity through food provisioning, which could in turn influence the behavior and values of their families. See “Female Identity, Food, and Power in Contemporary Florence,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 61 (2) (1988): 51.
- 2 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 264.
- 3 During the Economic Boom, publishers and editors of *La Cucina Italiana* assumed their readership to be female. When directly addressing this group, writers use feminine terms, such as *care lettrici* (dear readers) or *casalingue* (housewives). All translations in this chapter are the author’s own.
- 4 Because the first issue of *La Cucina Italiana* ran in 1929, this study uses tropes from no earlier than the 1930s to frame Economic Boom period food ad themes.
- 5 This period, known as “il boom economico” in Italy, extends the early 1950s through the late 1960s. The Italian economy experienced an average rate of growth of GDP of 5.8 percent per year between 1951 and 1963, and 5.0 percent per year between 1964 and 1973. For further explanation of the economic factors leading to Italy’s industrial development, see Mauro Rota’s “Credit and growth: Reconsidering Italian industrial policy during the Golden Age,” *European Review of Economic History* 17 (4) (2013): 431–51.
- 6 “Basic” foodstuffs constitute foods bought on a regular basis, including dietary staples such as rice and pasta, as well as beverages and condiments such as beer, margarine, and jam. Note that the attribution of “staple” to foods changes over time; in the 1930s jam frequently substituted for fresh fruit, and thus constituted a staple.
- 7 For the purposes of this discussion, “gender” refers to a biological definition of male and female. “Sex” refers to a social construction of male and female roles. Discussion of additional orientations lies beyond this study’s scope and purpose.
- 8 Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising under Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Adam Arvidsson, *Marketing Modernity: Italian Advertising from Fascism to Postmodernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003); David Forgas and Stephen Gundle, *Mass*

Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). Food Studies scholars frequently examine food advertisements to demystify cultural phenomena. For a classic example, see Fabio Parasecoli's "Feeding Hard Bodies: Food and Masculinities in Men's Fitness Magazines," in *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 187–201.

- 9 Primary research sites include Biblioteca Gastronomica Barilla, Archivio Storico Barilla, and Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione. Secondary sites include Wolfsonian-FIU and Museo della Figurina. Visits took place in October 2009 and June–July 2010. Examining roughly 850 Economic Boom ads permitted me to a) identify motifs related to gender division, and b) select six, characteristic examples.
- 10 *La Cucina Italiana* halted circulation during the late war and postwar years from 1943 to 1952. Other popular periodicals advertisements of the 1940s exhibit similar content and style to *La Cucina Italiana*'s 1930s food ads, indicating that increased commercial attention to gender crests in the late 1950s and early 1960s.
- 11 All advertisement titles are the author's own. I intend these inventions to both evoke ad content and be memorable for the reader.
- 12 *La Cucina Italiana* also ran cropped, black-and-white versions of this ad in their January 1957 and April 1957 editions.
- 13 Adam Arvidsson points to *La Cucina Italiana*'s role in this change, "According to advertising professionals, the weekly press, and in particular, the women's magazines—like *La Cucina Italiana*, which addressed its readership as *casalinghe* during this period—would serve as a kind of schooling in modernity. [...] Pedagogically they would present modern consumer goods as part of a new gendered ideal," *Marketing Modernity*, 70.
- 14 The Italian text reads, "Un brivido nella calura: In questo Agosto infocato è una vera gioia dissetarsi con birra. E come se una superstite brivido d'aria si raccogliesse su l'orlo del bicchiere. La birra è veramente una bevanda leggera, sana, squisita, che rinfresca e dà piacere. A sentirla scendere giù per le arse vie della gola, pare di rinascere. Disseta e fa bene a ogni ora. Bevete birra italiana."
- 15 Fabio Parasecoli explores similar issues in American food advertising in "Food and Popular Culture," in Paul Freedman, Joyce E. Chaplin, and Ken Albala (eds), *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).
- 16 For an examination of the new traditionalist thinking in the Economic Boom period, see Carol Helstosky's, "The Tradition of Invention: Reading History Through *La Cucina Casareccia Napoletana*," in Carol Bonomo Albright and Christine Palamidessi Moore (eds), *American Woman, Italian Style: Italian Americana's Best Writings on Women* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).
- 17 Rachel Black adeptly contextualizes these economic changes and their social markers at the level of a single marketplace in "Fare La Spesa:

Shopping, Morality, and Anxiety at the Market," in *Porta Palazzo: The Anthropology of an Italian Market* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 65–92.

- 18 Barbara Ketcham Wheaton has convincingly argued for the use of similar sources as lens with which to observe societal shifts at the level of the everyday. See, for example, "Cookbooks as Resources for Social History," in Paul Freedman, Joyce E. Chaplin, and Ken Albala (eds), *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History* (Los Angeles and Berkely: University of California Press, 2014).
- 19 The Italian text reads "La linea si acquista o si perde a tavola! Però attenzione! ... Non conta come mangiate ma come condite. Proprio così! Chiedetelo al medico. Se i cibi si mangiassero sconditi nessuno ingrasserebbe! Per mangiare bene salvando la linea occorre assolutamente un condimento leggero, privo di grassi pesanti! Il condimento più leggero che possiate desiderare è Foglia d'Oro."
- 20 Food advertising in Italy has continued to move towards personalization, using different vectors of identity to market their products. For a detailed study of how personal identity links with national representation through visual forms of culinary culture, see Ronda L. Brulotte and Michael Di Giovine's *Edible Identities: Food As Cultural Heritage* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).
- 22 Adam Arvidsson, *Marketing Modernity: Italian Advertising from Fascism to Postmodernity* (New York: Rutledge, 2003), 70.
- 21 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Abington, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 228.