

THE POLITICS OF DRINKING. WINE, TOASTS AND GASTRODIPLOMACY IN CONTEMPORARY ITALY (19TH-20TH CENTURIES)

Bere con diplomazia. L'uso politico dell'alcol nell'Italia contemporanea

Stefano Magagnoli, Beatrice Toti

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Abstract

This article analyzes the political uses of wine and toasts in Italian institutional banquets from Unification to the late twentieth century. Moving beyond dish-centered readings of historical menus, it interprets drinking practices as operative components of gastrodiplomacy and state ritual. Drawing on the Accademia Barilla menu collection and the Quirinale presidential menus, the study reads official menus not as static culinary inventories but as political texts. Adopting Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics, the banquet is examined as a strategic space of power within which the selection of wines functions as a tactical operation of symbolic positioning. The persistence of French oenological models in the Savoy period is interpreted as a diplomatic lingua franca of legitimacy; Fascist Italianization is framed as territorial rhetoric and autarchic assertion; Republican sobriety emerges as a democratic aesthetic staging national plurality. Across monarchy, dictatorship and republic, wine and toasts appear as performative instruments that negotiate hierarchy, identity and geopolitical alignment. Drinking, in this perspective, becomes a political practice through which the Italian state constructs and communicates its place in the international order.

Il saggio analizza gli usi politici del vino e dei brindisi nei banchetti istituzionali italiani dall'Unità alla fine del Novecento. Superando una lettura dei menu centrata esclusivamente sulle portate, interpreta le pratiche del bere come componenti della gastrodiplomazia e della ritualità statale. Le fonti principali sono il fondo menu dell'Accademia Barilla e i menu del Quirinale, letti non come semplici inventari culinari ma come testi politici. Attraverso la distinzione tra "strategie" e "tattiche" proposta da Michel de Certeau, il banchetto è considerato uno spazio strategico del potere entro cui la scelta dei vini agisce come operazione di posizionamento simbolico. La persistenza del modello enologico francese in età sabauda è interpretata come lingua franca diplomatica di legittimazione; l'italianizzazione fascista come retorica territoriale e affermazione autarchica; la sobrietà repubblicana come estetica democratica della pluralità nazionale. Dalla monarchia alla dittatura fino alla Repubblica, vino e brindisi emergono come strumenti di negoziazione dell'identità politica e del collocamento geopolitico dello Stato italiano.

Keywords: gastrodiplomacy, political banquets, wine and toasts, symbols and politics, nation-building, modern Italy. *Gastrodiplomazia, banchetti politici, vino e brindisi, simboli e politica, costruzione della nazione, Italia moderna.*

Stefano Magagnoli is full professor of economic history at the University of Parma, Department of economics and management, where he teaches global history and modern retail development. He is among the founders of Food Lab (Food

History Study Centre) set up at the University of Parma in 2009. His research of the last two decades focused on food history, with particular reference to the ‘invention of typicality’ and reputation.

Beatrice Toti holds a master’s degree in history and Oriental studies from the University of Bologna, where she completed a thesis entitled *La nascita di Slow Food nel contesto dell’Italia degli anni Ottanta*. In 2023, she began a PhD in economics (EMIS) at the University of Parma. Her research project, “The Culture of Tradition and Sustainability”, examines the factors that have shaped the relationship between products and territory, a key competitive advantage in contemporary consumption paradigms. Particular attention is devoted to the ways in which historical and cultural capital contribute to the construction of product quality and operate as expressions of identity.

Stefano Magagnoli è professore ordinario di storia economica presso l’Università di Parma, Dipartimento di economia e management, dove insegna storia globale e sviluppo del commercio al dettaglio moderno. È tra i fondatori del Food Lab (Centro studi di storia dell’alimentazione) istituito presso l’Università di Parma nel 2009. La sua ricerca degli ultimi due decenni si è concentrata sulla storia dell’alimentazione, con particolare riferimento all’“invenzione della tipicità” e alla reputazione.

Beatrice Toti ha conseguito una laurea magistrale in storia e studi orientali presso l’Università di Bologna, dove ha completato una tesi dal titolo La nascita di Slow Food nel contesto dell’Italia degli anni Ottanta. Nel 2023 ha iniziato un dottorato di ricerca in economia (EMIS) presso l’Università di Parma. Il suo progetto di ricerca, “La cultura della tradizione e della sostenibilità”, esamina i fattori che hanno plasmato il rapporto tra prodotti e territorio, un vantaggio competitivo fondamentale nei paradigmi di consumo contemporanei. Particolare attenzione è dedicata ai modi in cui il capitale storico e culturale contribuiscono alla costruzione della qualità dei prodotti e operano come espressioni di identità.

1. Wines, spirits and gastrodiplomacy

The historiographical analysis of historical menus from aristocratic courts or, more generally, from personalities and political movements has usually focused on the types of dishes served, the organisation and sequencing of courses, and how closely the gastronomic offerings aligned with or diverged from French culinary models, which for so long represented the mainstream to be followed at any official banquet.

Much less attention, perhaps due to the primary importance attributed to food as a key factor in gastrodiplomacy, has instead been given to the types of alcoholic beverages accompanying the courses. These beverages became as recognizable as the food served at the table. Wines, champagnes, vermouths, and liquors thus take on the form of a sometimes-refined phrasing, suggesting only a hint of the balance of flavours that emerged during meals and the sensations given by the toasts interspersed throughout the banquets.

This paper is part of a broader research dedicated to the study of the gastronomic habits and practices of the Italian political class, emphasizing how even the use of alcoholic beverages and official toasts, which are often the subject of media coverage precisely because they are used to convey messages of détente or to declare alliances, are fully in line with the so-called ‘gastrodiplomacy’. In some cases, then, as they become occasions to utter phrases of significant political value, they become an integral part of public diplomacy.

In particular, the research focused on the behaviour of the nation’s leaders. First, the Savoy Monarchy, then, Fascism and finally, after the institutional referendum of 1946 that turned Italy into a Republic, the Presidency of the Italian Republic. Many reflections have focused, in past studies, on the diffusion of French gastronomic habits and practices in the menus of the official banquets of Italian politicians, also measuring how and when these influences diminished, leading to the emergence of a more specific Italian gastronomic identity. An identity based not only on processing techniques and the presentation of dishes, but also on the growing importance of the relationship with the *terroir* (first results of the research in Adorni, Magagnoli 2021).

A similar discourse must obviously be made in regard to alcoholic beverages, wines in particular, served to accompany the dishes on the menu. In this case, too, the persistence of the ‘charm’ of French wines (from Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne), as well as some wines from the German-Rhine area, is definitely very long lasting, and is fully in line with the international primacy, in the diplomatic sphere, but not only, of French cuisine and wine products.

The *official* banquet is not a *normal* meal, but a social occasion containing different purposes and factors. Its main characteristic is that it is a ‘codified political ritual’, whose communicative functions are clear (Portincasa 2007-2008; 2011; 2016). Meals and toasts offered by institutions symbolise the discreet or ostentatious public representation of national identity and customs.

In this sense, the official banquet may also be interpreted through Michel de Certeau’s distinction between “strategies” and “tactics”. The banquet is first and foremost a strategic space: it is organized, codified, spatially controlled and symbolically owned by institutions. It represents what de Certeau would call a “proper place”, a site from which power manages its relations with an external other (de Certeau 1984). Within this strategic framework, however, concrete choices – such as the selection of a specific wine, the emphasis on terroir, or the decision to toast with a national rather than foreign label – function as tactical operations. They are situated, context-sensitive gestures that rearticulate meaning inside a pre-existing ceremonial structure.

Thus, drinking at official banquets cannot be reduced to passive consumption. Following de Certeau’s insight that consumption is itself a form of production, the choice and performance of wine operate as acts that produce geopolitical meaning. The toast is not merely symbolic representation; it is a performative micro-practice that reaffirms hierarchy, signals alignment, or negotiates cultural positioning (de Certeau 1984). By shifting attention from menus as static documents to menus as traces of operative practices, this study moves from descriptive reconstruction toward an analysis of political uses of taste.

These banquets create a special form of communication with their guests, based on two fundamental factors, in addition to conversation, forms of respect and non-verbal communication: the first is *substantial* and is linked to the nature of the food (structure and composition of the dishes) and the quality/reputation of the wines served; the second is *symbolic* and is contained in the graphic representations of the menu. In this context, the toast thus becomes a ritual gesture that is an integral part of diplomatic protocol and thus, to all intents and purposes, of ‘gastrodiplomacy’.

In official and institutional contexts such as breakfasts, receptions and banquets, the toast never plays the role of a simple convivial gesture, representing instead a codified act, charged with symbolic values. When the toast is made by Heads of State or Government, it is often accompanied by short speeches, the purpose of which is to emphasize the central aspects of the meeting that gave rise to the toast, such as, for example, the friendship between nations, the importance of the occasion or the commitment to economic or political cooperation. In this sense, we can therefore say that the toast has a ‘performative’ function. It marks the beginning or conclusion of a meeting by strengthening mutual bonds through the language of hospitality and reciprocity.

Traditionally, the alcoholic toast has always been linked to the use of native wines or liqueurs, chosen to represent the identity of the host nation (e.g. Champagne in France, Sakè in Japan, Porto in Portugal). It is, therefore, a choice that, as with food, emphasizes a close relationship with the traditions, customs and identity of the place where the toast takes place. Gestures and symbols are also part of the same rituality. The act of raising a glass and drinking together has ancient roots, with meanings ranging from celebrating trust (sharing the same drink) to wishing for peace (sealing an understanding).

Of course, there may be exceptions to the consumption of alcoholic beverages, both during meals and official toasts. These are restrictions determined by religious or health prescriptions, or more simply induced by changes in sensitivity in alcohol intake, which have become particularly widespread in recent decades. Nevertheless, the symbolic value of the toast has not changed, preserving all its ceremonial values. In short, we can say that, in this case, it is the gesture, rather than the substance, that conveys the meaning.

Nonetheless, it must be emphasized that the choice of drinks offered at official banquets or in reference cocktails is never casual. Indeed, they may serve to promote local products (e.g. the proposal of Barolo, Brunello di Montalcino or ‘French-style’ sparkling wines at Italian receptions) or to convey and propose explicit political messages (e.g. offering wines from disputed or symbolic regions). The nature of the event may therefore include real acts of gastronomic diplomacy, in which food, wine and beverages in general allow the construction of a real identity narrative, thus becoming an effective instrument of *soft power*.

At the origins of the Kingdom of Italy, during the Unification process, the Italian political class, in addition

to the organisation of the institutional system (Departments, Prefects, etc.) borrowed many other things from France, including, in particular, gastronomic styles and habits. This is an easily understandable observation, bearing in mind that until 1946 the Kingdom of Italy was ruled by the Savoy dynasty, which was closely linked to French language and culture¹. A dynasty, therefore, accustomed to the consumption of food with a French 'flavour' and 'texture' and wines that, even when they introduced real innovations, nevertheless drew on the gustatory balance of wines from beyond the Alps. All this, moreover, fits in with the observation that, in the years when Italy achieved political independence, French cuisine and taste enjoyed undisputed international supremacy².

French cuisine began to lose its centrality in gastronomic diplomacy as early as the beginning of the 20th century, with an acceleration after WWII. Wines also follow the same trend. Until the 1970s-80s, French wines, particularly those from Bordeaux and Burgundy, as well as Champagne of course, were considered the universal standard for official toasts. With the globalisation of tastes, the strengthening of national identity policies and the desire to promote local products (especially in the framework of 'made in'), this hegemony gradually eroded. The upward parabola of Italian wines experienced an acceleration at the end of the 20th century. From the early 2000s onward, wines appeared more frequently at official banquets, largely due to the international success of leading Italian labels such as Barolo, Brunello, Amarone, Prosecco, Franciacorta and above all, the Super Tuscans. Italy has also been able to enhance these wines in diplomatic contexts: the MAECI (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) has included wine in several gastrodiplomacy initiatives, including "La settimana della cucina italiana nel mondo" (The week of Italian cuisine in the world). If, in the past, Italian wine was associated with low quality and crude taste, since these changes the choice of an Italian wine in an official European or non-European context has become a declaration of cultural and geopolitical positioning, signaling modernity, quality, but also territorial rootedness.

How has this equilibrium concretely changed over the years? With what timescales and rhythms are we witnessing the affirmation of an Italian gastronomic model, of an Italian-style 'gastrodiplomacy'? At the end of the 19th century, thanks to the publication of Artusi's cookbook in 1891, we witness the 'birth' of a model of Italian cuisine and later on, the rediscovery of regional cuisine. How much and how does this affect the grammar of gastrodiplomacy? With the evolution of a national model of cuisine and with the growth of the reputation of Italian wines and spirits, how much remains of French gastronomic and oenological paradigms in diplomatic banquets? These are the questions we will attempt to answer here.

2. Sources and methodologies

This paper is part of broader research based on the analysis of the menu fund preserved by the Accademia Barilla Gastronomic Library in Parma, which covers a chronological span from Unification to Fascism. Another source used are the menus of the Presidency of the Republic, the subject of a recent publication by the Italian Academy of Cuisine³, based on the archival heritage of the Quirinale.

The Accademia Barilla menu collection counts almost 5,000 pieces and is a collection purchased by Livio Cerini di Castegnate, an art collector and well-known author of culinary works. It is a very important tool for the study of Italian food and wine culture. It contains around 2,000 pieces dating back to the first decades of the 19th century, some of which are very rare, such as a menu from 1848 (figure 1) describing the 'Russian-style' lunch offered by the Decurion Body of Turin⁴ to fifty members of the organizing committee of the National Holiday on 27 February. The occasion was the granting of the Statuto Albertino, a very important moment in the Italian Risorgimento and the country's unification process.

The lunch took place on 10 February 1848 and was opened by a traditional hors d'oeuvre in French cuisine, namely a tortoise soup⁵. This is followed by several *hors d'oeuvres*, including the typical Piedmontese *fritto misto*, then *Turbot with two sauces* (the *Turbot* in the French lexicon), followed by *Roast beef à l'Anglaise*, *Capon with truffles à la parisienne* (most likely with white Alba truffles instead of black Périgord truffles), a *Game Chartreuse*

(i.e. a *Chartreuse de gibier*), with woodcock, pigeon, partridge and pheasant on a bed of vegetables, according to the recipe from the *Treaty* of Giovanni Vialardi (head cook and pastry chef of the House of Savoy from 1845 to 1853). The sequence of meats is interrupted by Punch alla Romana, which is unmissable at this point in the menu⁶. After this interlude, lunch resumes with two vegetable dishes: ‘English peas’, boiled in water and served with butter, and ‘Artichokes Lyonnaise style’, glazed in butter, with sugar and white wine. After this respite, the sequence of roasts resumes, with *Pheasant on the spit with watercress* and a *jellied foie gras pate*. This is followed by desserts of English tradition: rhum plum pudding, sultana and candied fruit flan soaked in liqueur, Chantilly cream and finally ice cream and fruit⁷.

What is absolutely singular is the lack of any indication of the wines that would have accompanied such a sumptuous banquet, probably testifying that the menu culture, in this case, still appears extremely ‘rudimentary’ by omitting the name of the wines served with the various courses. No small oversight, which could perhaps be excused in this specific context, but would not have failed to cause astonishment on more official political and diplomatic occasions.

In the collection of the Accademia Barilla, Milan and Lombardy are represented by the menus proposed by the most important restaurants of the 19th century, in the kitchens of noble and bourgeois families, as well as circles and associations of various kinds. Also very important are the menus of the Universal Exhibition of 1906, which celebrated the opening of the Simplon Alpine Tunnel, which allowed for a direct railway connection between Milan and Paris, and those of the famous Milanese hotels and restaurants: Caffè Cova, café-concert Éden, Savini and the renowned Rebecchino in the Piazza del Duomo district of the same name, now demolished. Venice also appears with magnificent *fin-de-siècle* menus, also celebrating Gabriele d’Annunzio’s play *La nave*.

The collection includes some unique pieces, such as the two menus written in Teplitz Bay (Arctic Circle) during the Duke of Abruzzi’s attempt in 1900 to reach the North Pole with the ship *Stella Polare*. The Savoy menus are present from 1871, when the Italian capital was still in Florence, and cover the representative life of the reigning monarchy until 1946. There are numerous colonial and war menus, including one autographed by Gabriele d’Annunzio, dated 18 October 1919, during the occupation of Fiume. Very important is the collection of menus from the Fascist period, which includes lunches served at Palazzo Venezia in Rome, the working and representative residence of Benito Mussolini, as well as receptions held at the Hotel Excelsior, where official



Figure 1. Lunch offered to the organising committee of the National Day (1st March 1848).

meals were organised for Italian and foreign ministers. Another core of the collection concerns French cuisine, the country of origin of the modern menu, with items ranging from the *Belle Époque* to *Art Nouveau* and *Deco* up to more recent times. These include military, First World War, ministerial and Presidential menus, as well as menus from Parisian and French restaurants (some with Escoffier's autographs). The collection also includes the 44 pieces assembled by Captain Medici di Marignano and the important collection (165 pieces) of Alberto Cougnet, a doctor and swordsman born in Nice when he was still Italian, father of Armando Cougnet, director of the «Gazzetta dello Sport» and founder of the Giro d'Italia, a lover of the table, writer of cookery books and collector of menus. Numerous examples of his collection have been reproduced in various monographic publications (Mordacq 1989; Aa.Vv. 1990; Di Michele 2002). It is a collection of such size and quality that it can be explored in various ways, both from a stylistic point of view (focusing on the evolution of taste and aesthetics) and from a gastronomic point of view.

3. Savoy court cuisine: a Piedmontese or French model?

In the mid-19th century, Savoy court cuisine reflected a refined synthesis of Piedmontese tradition and French models, thanks to the influence of chefs trained in Paris and a gastronomic culture permeated by historical and geographical proximity to France. French cuisine, as well as wines, had a dominant role as a shared gastronomic code in official international circles. It was a political and reassuring choice, capable of satisfying the expectations of diplomatic elites. The persistence of French culinary and oenological models should not be read merely as imitation or cultural dependence. Rather, it functioned as a diplomatic lingua franca. In the second half of the nineteenth century, adopting French gastronomic codes meant positioning the young Italian state within a recognized hierarchy of civilized nations. French wine was not simply a matter of taste; it was a strategic language of legitimacy. In de Certeau's terms, the Savoy court operated within a "strategic" framework already structured by French symbolic capital (de Certeau 1984). The banquet space did not belong exclusively to the Italian state: it was embedded in an international grammar of recognition. To depart too abruptly from French forms would have risked symbolic marginality.

Piedmont developed its own culinary identity, adapting local ingredients to recipes from beyond the Alps and adopting 'Russian-style' service, which is more modern than 'French-style' service. In 'Russian-style' service, dishes are served one after the other already plated. It is a form of service that reflects the desire for innovation of the emerging bourgeois social class (Rambourg 2005, 183). In this way, the meal was divided into several parts: first the soup, then the hors d'oeuvres, large dishes, usually hot, accompanied by starters such as sour mixtures, roots, butter, cured meats, oysters, then the entremets, lighter dishes such as vegetables or creams; the pastries and finally the cakes and fruit such as dessert (Novello 2004, 82 ff.; Flandrin 2002; Rambourg 2008 and 2009; Stengel 2015, 190).

Piedmontese cuisine in the 19th century was a real hinge between the French gastronomic tradition and the progressive development of an Italian model, thanks to the decisive contribution of Giovanni Vialardi⁸. It was, in fact, Vialardi who was the first to break with the old Court traditions, replacing the most renowned French wines with Piedmontese wines, in particular Barolo (Novello 2004, 60 ff.). This substitution should not be interpreted solely as culinary innovation. It represents a tactical reappropriation within a strategic framework. While the structure of the banquet remained French in syntax and ritual order, the insertion of Barolo functioned as a symbolic displacement: a local product was made to occupy a position previously reserved for transalpine prestige. In this sense, the Savoy court did not abruptly reject the French model; it gradually "inhabited" it differently. The French form was preserved, but its internal content was slowly nationalized. Italian wine entered the diplomatic grammar not by overthrowing it, but by infiltrating it. The process of establishing an Italian food and wine identity at official banquets had now begun (Musci 1999). Of course, the French influence continued to play a leading role, but already in the second half of the 19th century, despite the backwardness of an industrial structure still in its infancy (Pellegrino 2014; Chiapparino 1998), Italy was

becoming seriously aware (especially on the occasion of the Universal Expositions) of its great potential in the field of food and wine. The gradual emergence of Italian wines in official banquets thus reflects a broader process of nation-building through taste. What changes is not only the provenance of bottles but the structure of symbolic authority: from borrowed prestige to domestically produced distinction. The political use of wine marks the transition from diplomatic imitation to cultural self-assertion.

4. Eating and Drinking Italian Style

Epiphany 1878. Only a few days before the death of King Vittorio Emanuele II, the sovereign who had led the unification of the country. A lunch for the diplomatic corps is being held in the Quirinale Palace. The musical programme (from Rossini to Strauss) was excellent, but what stood out were the dishes and the wine list with which to accompany the food and for the ritual toasting (figure 2).

The meal is sumptuous, but it is hard to believe we are in Rome, so strong is the imprint of French cuisine. To begin with, the appetizers: oysters, followed by 'Profiteroles à la Fleury' soup. To follow Bouchées à la d'Orléans, Filets de vanneaux à la Chevreuse, Saumon garni à l'Anglaise, Filets de boeufs à la Châteaubriand, Quail à la Macdonald, Epigramme de volaille aux petits pois, Chau-froid de perdreaux à la Princesse, Asperges en branches sauce hollandaise, Truffes au Champagne. The grammar of the dishes and the gastrotoponyms give the illusion of being at a banquet at the Palais du Luxembourg or another aristocratic palace. Later, we are confronted with other French-style preparations: Pâté de grives à la Chartres, Langue à l'écarlatte à la gelée, and finally Punch au Curaçao. The dishes then follow a Parisian melody: Pheasants and turkeys on the spit, White truffle salad, Pudding à la Célestine, Cream of Tea, Pineapple Vacherin and Empress Cake. Ice creams round off the meal: Portuguese-style hazelnut mousse cream and citron and raspberry fruit salad. The wines are up to the task and still offer a choice linked to the French wine tradition. To accompany the oysters, we start with a Montrachet, a fine wine made from Chardonnay grapes from both the Bordeaux region and Burgundy (in this case, the provenance is not declared). All the other starters are accompanied by Mouton Rothschild, one of the most appreciated and prestigious Bordeaux reds, the only one to have been promoted (in 1973) to the rank of Premier Grand Cru to date. The pate of thrushes is then accompanied by a Johannisberg from Germany's Rhine Valley, a prestigious white wine made from Riesling grapes since the Middle Ages. The meat tasting proceeds with a Grand Crémant Impérial while the desserts are served with an 1821 Malaga.

29 January 1883, again a typically French menu (figure 3). We find Consommé, Croustades à la Parisienne,

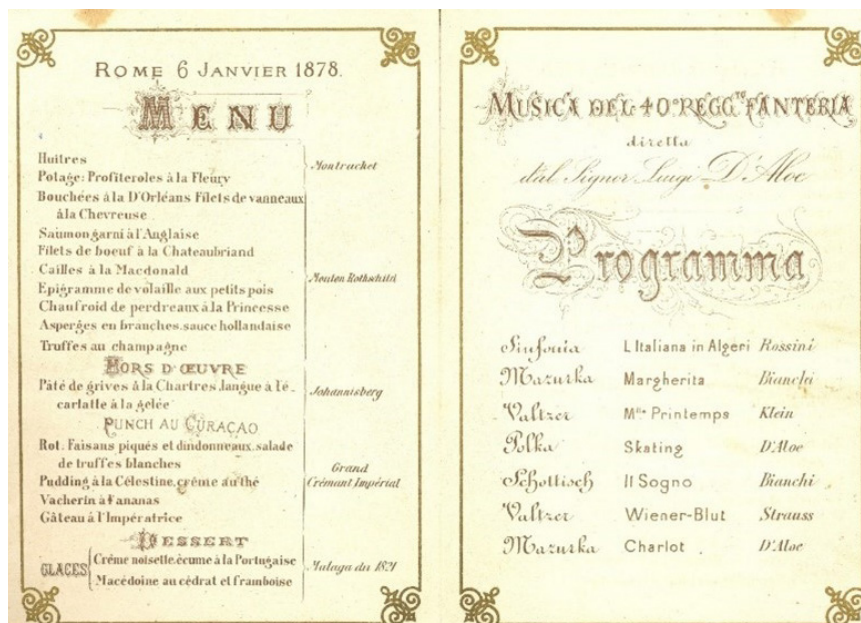


Figure 2. Lunch for the Diplomatic Corps at the Quirinale Palace (Rome, 6 January 1878). Source: ABM, Collocaz. A.112.05 – Inv. 1937 (a and b).

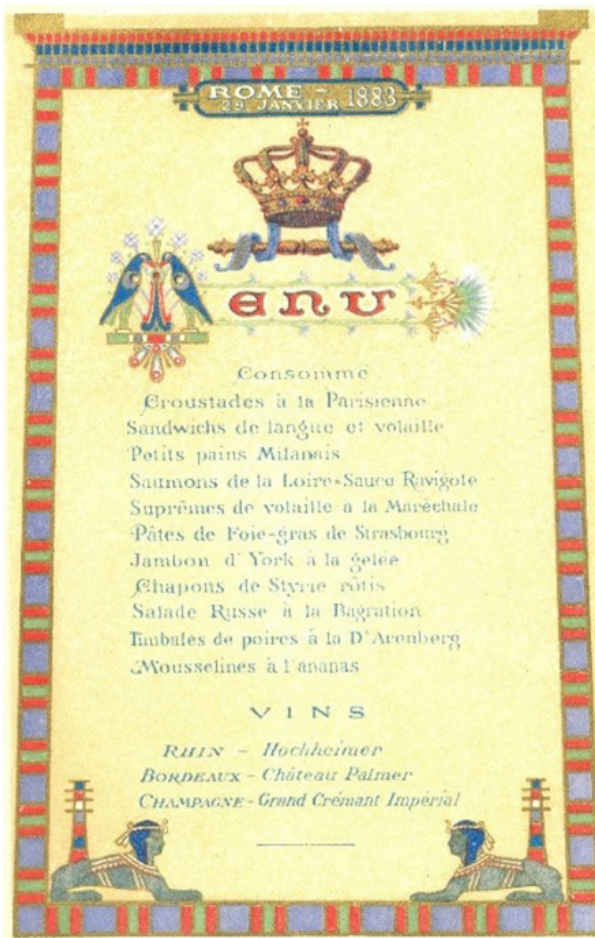


Figure 3. Court Feast (Rome, Palazzo del Quirinale, 29 January 1883). Source: ABM, Collocaz. A.112.07 – Inv. 1944.

Suprêmes de volaille, Pâtés de foie gras and Prosciutto. In this case it is not the Italian hams that would later become famous (Parma and San Daniele), but Prosciutto di York, which was considered by all to be of superior quality and taste. Even in the choice of wines, Italy continues to be excluded. Next to a renowned Hochheimer from the Rhine (dry Riesling from the vines of Eltville am Rhein) we find a Château Palmer from Bordeaux (fine wine from the Médoc with a high percentage of Merlot grapes) and the ever-present Champagne Grand Crémant Impérial. In short, we are in Rome, on the last Sunday of the freezing January of 1883, but the guests dine and toast with food and wines that have come from afar and certainly do not belong to the local food and wine tradition.

Many more years would have to pass before a symbol of Italian cuisine would appear on court menus. Meanwhile, in 1891 Pellegrino Artusi published his cookbook (Artusi 1891); nevertheless, the French gastronomic model continued to shape the eating habits of the upper social classes, particularly at the Savoy court. This orientation was further reinforced by the diffusion of Auguste Escoffier's *Livre de menus* (Escoffier 1912), which consolidated the primacy of French cuisine in defining taste and the international culinary code (Portincasa 2007-2008, 161).

The first signs that Italian territory and taste were beginning to impose themselves are seen in the following years. Rome, 29 January 1887 (figure 4): alongside game with truffles from the Périgord, salmon from the Loire, foie gras from Strasbourg and the inevitable Grand Crémant champagne, we find Modena ham (at the time it was quite famous in Italy, more so than Parma ham), but above all a Brolio Ricasoli, a Chianti wine produced in the castle of Brolio, the birthplace of modern classic Chianti, which was already popular at the end of the 19th century. It is still early days, but some Italian food and wine elements are beginning to make their way onto a menu that is still fundamentally French, both in language and in the structure of the meal.

31 January 1898, still in Rome. Italy had been united for almost forty years and was approaching the end of the century, but the menu served at a grand court ball (figure 5) was still largely French⁹. Leaving aside the dishes, the



Figure 4. Official Breakfast (Rome, 29 January 1887). Source: ABM, Collocaz. A.112.11 – Inv. 1948.



Figure 5. Grand Ball of the Royal Court (Rome, 31 January 1898).

only real novelty is the wine list, very simple but, with the exception of champagne, entirely Italian. First of all, we find Gattinara, a dry red wine produced in the Vercelli hills at the foot of Monte Rosa, the quality of which was guaranteed by the Royal Experimental Oenological Station, set up in Gattinara in 1872, comprising an oenological school, an experimental cellar and a meteorological station. Alongside Gattinara is a very rare Castel di Calattubo di Alcamo in Sicily, a wine that has now disappeared, but which during the 19th and 20th centuries enjoyed great success, having received the honour of being awarded the title of supplier to the Royal Household and the right to use the Royal Coat of Arms on the label. The first photograph of wine-making Italy is extremely emblematic, depicting the two extremes of the peninsula: the Alpine North and the South, recently integrated into the Kingdom of Savoy. From a communicative point of view, it is an extremely effective image. Brigandage is only a fading memory, and the old Sicilian baronies enter fully, with their wines, into the oenological Pantheon of the Nation.

The official banquets of the following years retained their French roots, although 'drinking Italian style' quickly became customary. At the spring lunch served in the garden of the Quirinale in 1905 (figure 6), Castello di Calattubo and Barolo became the real protagonists, leaving Champagne to fill the role of 'bubbly', a product for which Italy was not yet ready¹⁰. This was also the case the following year (figure 7), when, taking advantage of the first hot Milanese weather, a Capri Bianco was served, a wine with a fresh, dry taste and low alcohol content¹¹. The French oenological traditions obviously resisted; after the Capri Bianco we find a Pontet Canet, a fine wine from the Médoc bordering the Mouton-Rothschild estate.

A real turning point in the history of official banquets came in 1908 with King Victor Emmanuel III's decision to allow official menus to be written in Italian (Cougnet 1910). The change sparked a public debate in the



Figure 6. Official breakfast in the gardens of the Quirinale (Rome, March 1905).



Figure 7. Official Breakfast (Milan, 2 May 1906).

national press and was introduced on 22 December 1907 (figure 8), with the first royal court menu written entirely in Italian. Of course, there were still several ‘quotations’ from a French menu, but at the same time signs and symbols of Italy began to appear: especially among the wines, but also in dishes such as the Piedmontese salad and the Savoy-style peach ice cream¹². Among the wines we find Calattubo from Sicily, but also Barbaresco from the Langhe and a Moscato Conca d’oro.

Archive documents show, however, a clear difference between official lunches for foreign dignitaries and those for local authorities. In the latter case, the Italianization of the names of the dishes and the structure of the meals took place much earlier, demonstrating that in the House of Savoy the habit of eating and drinking Italian (especially Piedmontese) had been widespread for some time and that therefore the Savoy Court had already incorporated an Italian food and wine model well before the 1907 turnaround. This is confirmed, for example, by the banquet offered by the electors of the College of Rome to Francesco Crispi on 23 May 1895 (figure 9)¹³. From Zuppa alla Principessa to Sfogliata alla Savoiarda, from Filetto di bue all’italiana to the national Cognac, everything was Italian. Even the wines spoke Italian: Genzano Bianco, Velletri Bianco and Marino Rosso, with an Italian Spumante as well, instead of the usual Champagne. Even the list of dishes had an Italian title. *Minute*, not menu. It is a total rejection of French influences (gastronomic and linguistic) that is easily understandable given Francesco Crispi’s strongly anti-French sentiments. The diaphragm has been broken. From now on, the menus of the official lunches of Italian political leaders will be written in the national language. In time, the structure of the meals will also undergo further changes, gradually incorporating Italian food and wine traditions, such as pasta.

However, this process of change should not be interpreted as a mere symbolic or cultural evolution. In reality, in our opinion, there has been a major change in the food markets. It was only at the beginning of the 20th century that Italian producers acquired the ability to supply high quality products, in quantities appropriate to market demand and with defined quality standards. This is true in general, but even more so for cheeses, cured meats and wines: three sectors that experienced great progress during the 20th century and spread a growing awareness of *terroir* in Italy (Portincasa 2007-2008, 164).

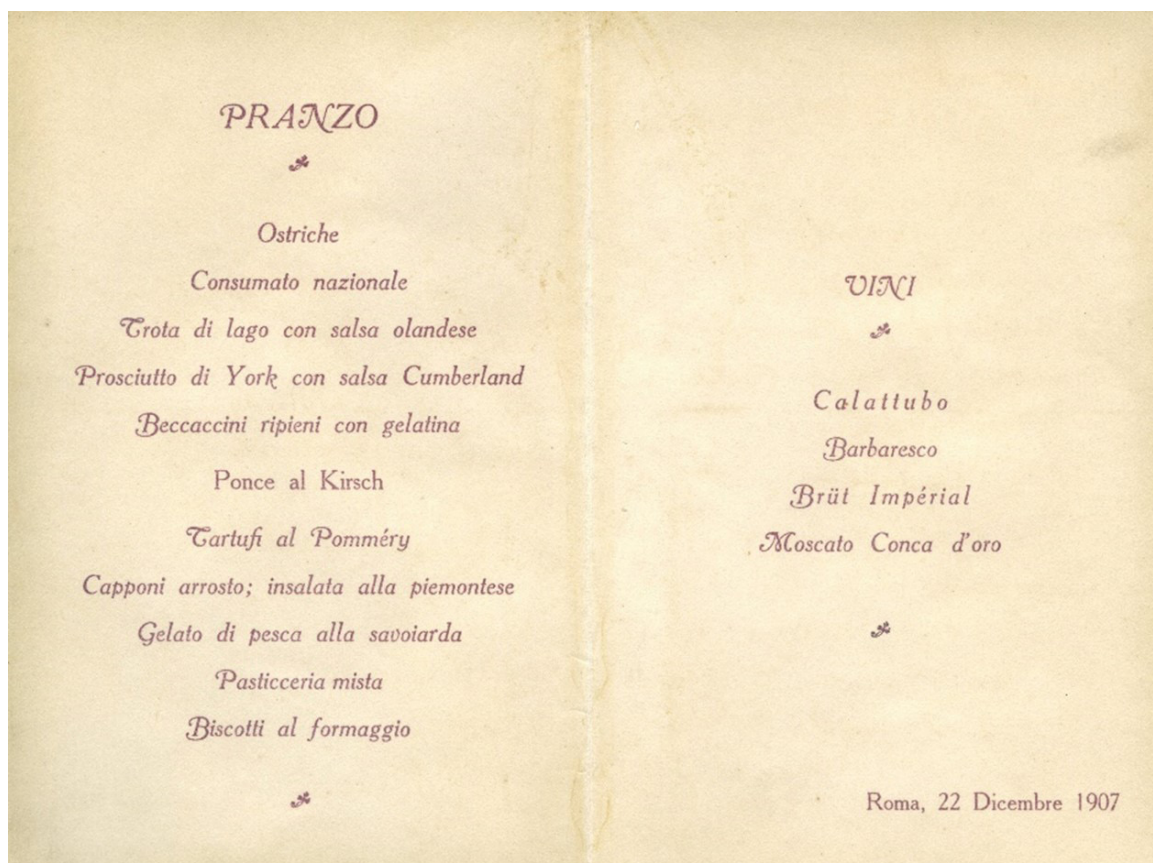


Figure 8. The royal court’s first menu in Italian (Rome, 22 December 1907).



Figure 9. Banquet offered by the electors of the IV Collegio to Francesco Crispi (Rome, 23 May 1895).

6. The menus of Fascism

As is well known, the fascist regime intervened in various ways to spread and enhance Italian identity, both culturally and linguistically (Del Boca, Legnani, Rossi 1995). Foreign names for things and objects were banned and, in some regions, such as South Tyrol, traditional German place names were forcibly replaced with Italian names, heralding the process of 'forced Italianization' of the region (Di Michele 2002). It is not surprising, therefore, that during the Fascist regime (1922-1945) the process of Italianization of cuisine and menu presentation was further accelerated.

The Italianization of menus during the Ventennio cannot be reduced to stylistic nationalism. It must be situated within the broader anti-xenophile campaigns promoted by the regime, which targeted foreign lexical borrowings and foreign cultural influence as symptoms of moral and political weakness. Language, taste and consumption were all subjected to symbolic purification. In this framework, the official banquet became a pedagogical stage. It did not merely represent the nation: it performed the nation in front of domestic and foreign audiences. The replacement of French terminology, the disappearance of foreign labels, and the promotion of Italian wines formed part of a broader politics of autarchic self-representation.

The menu of the luncheon offered on 23 May 1932 by the Head of Government (i.e. Benito Mussolini) at the International Convention of Transatlantic Airmen (we are in the years when Italo Balbo, an important Fascist politician, made some important crossings from Europe to America aboard Italian planes) is written entirely in Italian. Apart from a 'brodo ristretto', the French consommé, the meal has a typically Italian structure: antipasto, pasta dish (although 'Liguste cardinale' may not be pasta alla cardinale, but lobster), meat dish with vegetables, dessert and fruit. Among the wines, an Orvieto bianco (a wine that has lost much of its appeal over time, but which in the past represented one of the excellent productions of Italian viticulture) and the Gran Spumante Gancia (Grand Mousseux Gancia), one of the first Italian challenges to the French 'bubbles' (figure 10). By the early 1930s, this symbolic Italianization was reinforced institutionally. In 1932 the Ministry of For-



Figure 10. Lunch held by His Excellency the Head of Government at the 'International Convention of Transoceanic Aviators' (Rome, 23 May 1932). Source: ABM, Cote A.1141.03 – INV. 2247 (a and b).

eign Affairs reportedly instructed Italian embassies to privilege – and increasingly to serve exclusively – Italian wines at official receptions. Such directives reveal that wine selection was no longer an aesthetic choice but a matter of state policy. If French wines in the Savoy period functioned as a strategic language of diplomatic recognition, Fascist wine policy reversed the equation: now the regime sought recognition through the assertion of national products. The toast became an instrument of economic propaganda and ideological coherence.

The same observations can be made about many other menus. On 8 November 1932, for example (figure 11), a rather rich autumn menu (lamb, fish and game) was served, with Russian caviar as an aperitif (Volga Pearls). There was also a typical cake from southern Italy, the Sicilian Cassata (filled with ricotta), and two very important Italian wines, still popular today: Tuscan Chianti and Venetian Soave. In addition, there is a Spumante di Piemonte, further establishing that Italy is capable of producing its own 'bubbly'. A few years later, on 24 June 1935, a lunch was offered to British minister Eden (figure 12). Caviar was always offered as an appetizer, followed by two main dishes: 'Aragoste in bella vista' (Lobsters on display)¹⁴ and 'White capon alla luculliana'. The wine was served with a dry Orvieto and a Villa Antinori (a Tuscan red wine with the Marchesi Antinori label). This is followed by another Italian sparkling wine, with the indication of the 1926 vintage, thus following the tradition of French vintage Champagnes.

Extremely interesting is the lunch menu offered on 14 January 1937, again by the Head of Government Benito Mussolini, to Hermann Göring, a very influential politician in Nazi Germany (figure 13). For the first time, *terroir*, the close correlation between a food product and a geographical indication, is spoken of so explicitly. To begin with, guests are offered a salmon trout from Lake Garda; this is followed by capons with Spoleto pearls (the question remains as to whether they are lentils or black truffles, a likely hypothesis given that the small Umbrian truffles go very well with the fatty taste of capons). But the presence of geographical indications continues with the Giant Asparagus of Imperia (Liguria) and presents three notable wines: a Lacrima Christi, a typical white wine from Vesuvius; a 1921 Barolo and a Gran Spumante di Alba (the last two from the Piedmont Langhe). The insistence on geographical indications in the Göring banquet is particularly revealing. *Terroir* here operates not simply as culinary precision but as territorial rhetoric. Naming Lake Garda, Spoleto, Imperia, Vesuvius or Alba transforms the menu into a cartographic performance of the nation. The Italian peninsula is symbolically condensed into a sequence of regional products offered to a foreign dignitary. In some way, the

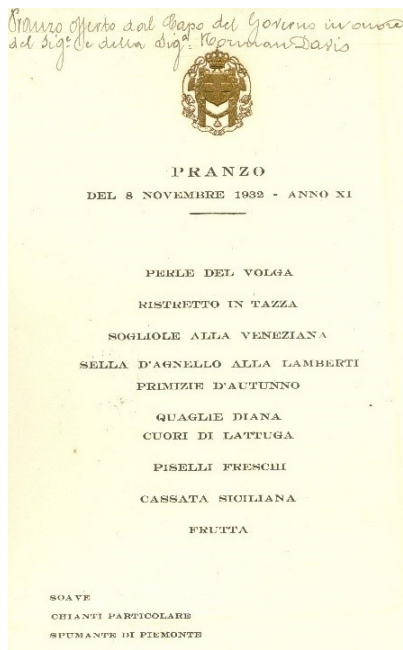


Figure 11. Official lunch offered by His Excellency the Head of the Government to Mr. and Mrs. Norman Davis (Rome, 8 November 1932). Source: ABM, Cote A.1141.05 – INV. 2223.

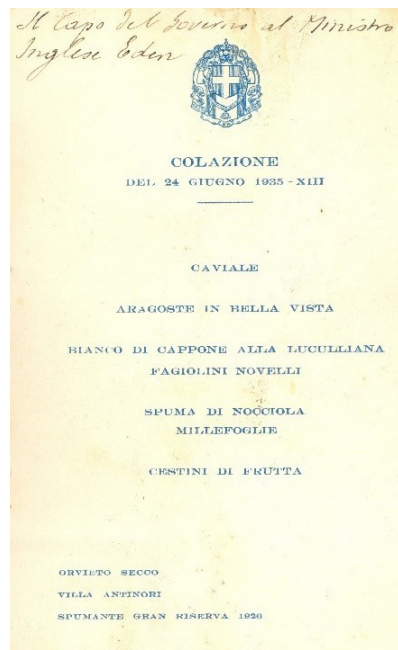


Figure 12. Official reception offered by His Excellency the Head of the Government in honour of the British Minister Eden (Rome, 24 June 1935). Source: ABM, Cote A.1141.19 – INV. 2215.

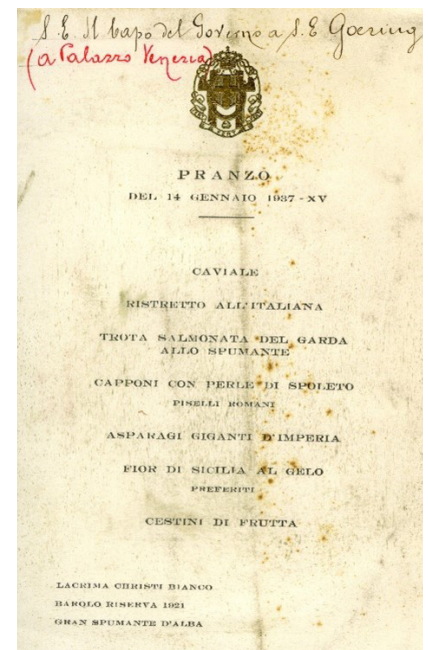


Figure 13. Official lunch offered by His Excellency the Head of Government in honour of Hermann Göring (Rome, 14 January 1937). Source: ABM, Cote A.1141.21 – INV. 2218.

Fascist regime transforms strategic space into territorial narration: the banquet table becomes a map. The consumption of wine thus enacts a controlled circulation of national geography.

Under Fascism, therefore, the political use of drinking reaches a new level of intentionality. What in the Savoy period had been gradual symbolic displacement becomes explicit state doctrine. The regime does not merely inhabit diplomatic grammar differently; it seeks to rewrite it. Yet this process remains embedded in international ceremonial forms, revealing the tension between nationalist assertion and diplomatic convention.

5. Menu of the Republic

On 2 June 1946, a popular referendum by universal suffrage changed the institutional form of Italy, which became a parliamentary republic. After 85 years of reign, the Savoy monarchy, considered complicit in the fascist dictatorship and responsible for the war, was removed from the country, which thus became a republican state. The political forces that had defeated fascism installed a new parliament and government and began drafting the Republican Constitution, which came into force on 1 January 1948. Apart from a few minor changes, it is the same Constitution that is still in force today.

The menu of the last supper offered by the Sovereigns of Italy clearly shows the moral, even before the material conditions of the country on 4 May 1946, a year after the end of the war and a few days before the institutional referendum. The menu is very restrained compared to those offered by the Court in the pre-war period. Everything alludes to the difficult conditions in the country. The menu is typed with a faded ribbon; luxury is banned (*Pranzo al Quirinale 2004*, 123).

The contrast between the last royal dinner and the early republican banquets is not merely material but symbolic. The fading ribbon and the absence of luxury mark the end of a regime of representation. The Republic inherits the ritual of the banquet but empties it of dynastic ostentation. Drinking remains, but its tone changes. If the monarchy had sought legitimacy through alignment with international aristocratic codes and

Fascism through nationalist assertion, the Republic gradually develops a rhetoric of moderation. Sobriety becomes a political language.

Thereafter, the economic and moral conditions of the country improved very rapidly. Starting in the early 1950s, Italy experienced an important phase of economic development, which a few years later turned into a real boom. It not only modernised the country, but changed it profoundly, spreading welfare to all social classes thanks to a universal and effective welfare state system. The Quirinale's menus were always characterised by a sober elegance, both in the 1940s and 1950s and in the following decade. Italy was seeing its material well-being grow, but the tone of the lunches offered to foreign dignitaries remained discreet, avoiding ostentation, both in the design of the menus and in the structure of the meals (*Pranzo al Quirinale* 2004, 130-133; *I menu del Quirinale* 2011).

On 26 June 1962, a very simple lunch was offered to the King of Saudi Arabia (figure 15); a simplicity of menu repeated on 26 April 1966 for the President of the Soviet Union, Andrej Gromyko (figure 16), and on 5 October 1966 for the King of Sweden, Gustav Adolphe VI (figure 17) (*Pranzo al Quirinale* 2004, 135 and 137; *I menu del Quirinale* 2001, 145). This simplicity did not apply to the wines, which included Barolo 1947, Barbaresco Gaja and Krug champagne. A French-Italian trilogy of excellence accompanied the sobriety of the dishes, which nevertheless offered typically Italian flavours, seasoned with a hint of the exotic: the rice (typical of northern Italy) is prepared in Pilaf, but served with Finanziere. Pollastre allo spiedo are from the Arno and Carciofi alla Romana (*in Roma style*). The Sea Bass is from the Adriatic, and the Raviolini are Piedmontese style. Salad is Partenopean and Cassata is Sicilian. Clear evidence of the deep-rooted bond with the land and the Italian gastronomic tradition. The wines then are no less, showing the increased variety of high quality products available, embracing Piedmont (Grignolino, Barolo, Barbaresco), Veneto (Soave), Tuscany (Montecarlo Mazzini, Santa Margherita Ruffino).

The apparent simplicity of these menus should not be mistaken for a lack of symbolic intention. Rather, sobriety functions as a democratic aesthetic. In a constitutional republic founded after dictatorship, excessive display would risk evoking authoritarian grandeur. The controlled elegance of the Quirinale expresses institutional continuity without theatricality. In this phase, the political use of wine no longer emphasizes rupture or ideological assertion but national plurality. The coexistence of Piedmontese, Tuscan, Venetian and Sicilian labels on the same table performs a plural Italy. Unlike the Fascist cartographic rhetoric of territorial dominance, the Republic stages territorial diversity as unity.

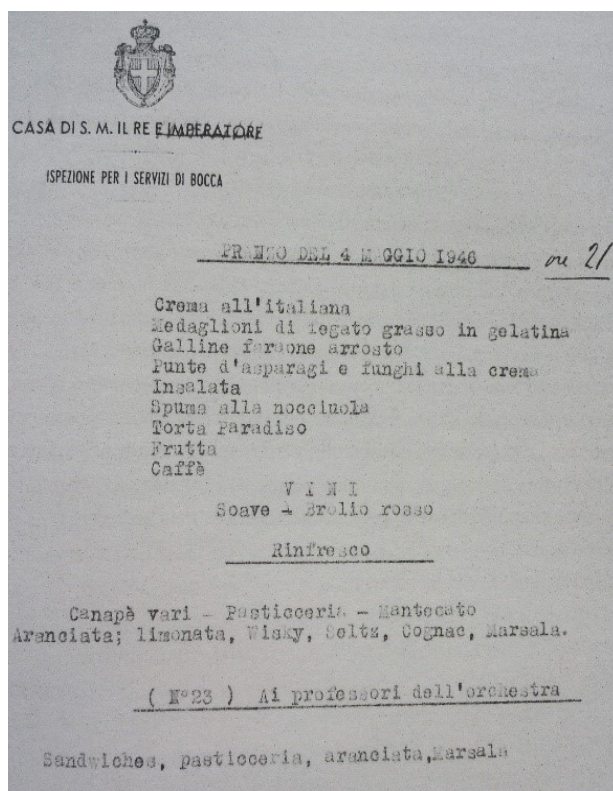


Figure 14. Official dinner offered by the King on 4 May 1946.



Figure 15. Lunch offered to the King of Saudi Arabia (26 June 1962).



Figure 16. Lunch offered to the President of the Soviet Union, Andrej Gromyko (26 April 1966).



Figure 17. Lunch offered to the King of Sweden, Gustav Adolphe VI (5 October 1966).

This formal sobriety, which did not mean abandonment of the quality and richness of taste of the preparations, continued in the following years. Menus in the 1980s increasingly mentioned ‘pastasciutta’, now recognised internationally as a dish of absolute elegance, one of the main expressions of Italian gastronomic identity, whereas from the 17th century it had ceased to be part of haute cuisine, becoming, under the name ‘maccheroni’, the main food of the working classes in Naples (Montanari 2019). Sobriety in meals and menu design became a common feature of the Presidents of the Italian Republic from the 1980s onwards, ushering in further simplification in the structure of official meals (*I menu del Quirinale* 2011, 157 ff). By the 1980s, the international recognition of pasta and Italian wines allowed the Republic to rely less on demonstrative rhetoric. National cuisine had become globally legitimized. The need to assert identity through contrast diminished as Italian products acquired autonomous prestige in global markets. One might say that what had once been tactical assertions within a dominant French strategic order had by now become structural capital. Italian wine no longer needed to displace French prestige; it had become part of the international strategic grammar itself.

Conclusion

From this overview of official menus, read not as culinary inventories but as political texts, three major transformations emerge. First of all, for the first half-century of united Italy, that is, until 1908 with the first ‘Italian’ menu, the prevailing food and wine model was French, and French was the language used to write menus. The influence of transalpine enogastronomy at the highest levels of political and diplomatic representation persisted for a long time. The sovereigns themselves, in their private meals, made extensive use not only of the Italian language, but also of dishes now rooted in Italian customs; the wines consumed on these occasions are Italian, as well.

The second consideration concerns the gradual appearance of autochthonous gastrotponyms, linked to Italian localities and regions. This is a way of discovering *terroir* and enhancing Italian food and wine excellence. In many cases they are not yet able to emulate the fame of French products and wines, but in time they will be able to compose a menu of Italian food and wine excellence.

Finally, one last consideration concerns the menus of the Presidency of the Republic: elegant, refined and of high quality (given the fame of the chefs working at the Quirinale; Portincasa 2011, 9), without ever conceding

anything to pomp and ostentation. This is a characteristic of all Presidents of the Republic, increasingly evident since the 1980s and 1990s, when sobriety became part of the nation's DNA.

Across monarchy, dictatorship and republic, the ritual of drinking persists as a codified political practice. The only thing that changes is its grammar: from borrowed aristocratic legitimacy to nationalist assertion and democratic moderation and plural representation. Wine and toasts thus reveal themselves not as decorative elements of state ceremony but as operative instruments in the construction and negotiation of political identity.

Notes

- 1 Oliva 1999; Smith 2002; Barberis 2007. For Savoy food rituals, see: Aa.Vv. 1885; Bracco 2007; Novello 2001.
- 2 This superiority was also made possible by the high quality of French products, which throughout the 19th century were far superior to Italian ones (Magagnoli 2015).
- 3 Campiverdi, Ricciardi 2011; a comparison with France in Sacré, Bertin 2011.
- 4 A sort of *ante litteram* city council, composed of the most prominent representatives of the nobility and the urban bourgeoisie.
- 5 Also in the film *Babette's Lunch*, directed by Gabriel Axel in 1987, lunch starts with the same dish.
- 6 It is prepared, according to Vialardi's instructions, with green tea and lemon and orange juice and zest, sweetened, mixed and frozen, seasoned with whipped egg white and cognac or maraschino (Campiverdi, Ricciardi 2011).
- 7 The menu is kept in *Biblioteca Gastronomica Academia Barilla – Collezione di menu storici* (from now on ABM). More information in Cerini di Castegnate 1988; Manzo 2012.
- 8 Giovanni Vialardi (1813-1902) was one of the most important Piedmontese chefs of the 19th century, known as head chef and pastry chef at the Savoy court from 1845 to 1853. His most famous work is the *Trattato di cucina, pasticceria moderna, credenza e relativa confetteria* (1854), a fundamental text for the codification of 19th-century Piedmontese cuisine. Vialardi made a decisive contribution to the definition of a culinary style that, while inspired by French gastronomy, emphasised local ingredients and techniques, promoting a synthesis between courtly refinement and territorial roots.
- 9 ABM, Collocaz. A.112.20 – Inv. 1960.
- 10 ABM, Colloc. A.112.53 – Inv. 2005.
- 11 ABM, Coll. A.112.63 – Inv. 2024.
- 12 ABM, Collocaz. A.112.73 – Inv. 2035 (a and b).
- 13 ABM, Collocaz. A.41.01 – Inv. 2472.
- 14 It is a typical dish of 'international' French cuisine (see Özge Samanci's article on Turkey).

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