

'Feeding Fascism' Lecture: Italian Food History's Relevance to Today's Political Climate

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Analyzing anti-fascist domestic protests by Italian women under Mussolini's regime may provide a relevant background for the current rise of far-right European politicians, one historian who specializes in Italian food studies and politics said.

Diana Garvin, an Italian professor who focuses on food and Mediterranean studies at the University of Oregon, presented her "Feeding Fascism: the Politics of Women's Food Work," lecture at Boston University on Oct. 26 about the contents of her recent book of the same name.

"Certain food products tell a story about Italian history and national identity; there are still traces of the regime in Italian factories, farms and cooking," Garvin said about the significance of Italian fascism and food studies.

The author spoke to an audience of gastronomy students as part of the Metropolitan College's Pépin Lecture Series: she explained how fascism affected Italian working-class women and homemakers via pro-natalist rhetoric, trade restrictions imposed on beloved ingredients and a national redesign of kitchen spaces to promote maximum efficiency.

Women subtly protested the National Fascist Party and Benito Mussolini, who served as Italy's prime minister from 1922 to 1943, by singing anti-fascist work songs such as "Bella Ciao" on farms, operating illegal restaurants, and during Rome cooking fire riots, when women started small cooking fires to counter smaller, government-imposed kitchens, Garvin said.

The hypocritical ideology that fascism pushed, "seemed progressive, but the intent was regressive," Garvin said: Italian fascism's pro-natalist push was adopted by companies who installed social services including pregnancy leave, health insurance and onsite childcare to fuse private and public life and gain complete control of workers.

Garvin said this kind of hypocrisy was also exhibited by current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, "the most far right Italian leader since Mussolini," who claimed to: promote sustainability but favors removing a fertilizer use cap, protect food sovereignty, the privileging of local food communities and farmers over large corporations, but defined this as "protectionism," and supported culinary nationalism and exclusion, "a telltale sign of fascism."

Bianca Tocco, a BU employee and student in the food studies certificate program, said the lecture was heavily related to her gastronomy studies, "We were just talking about changing marketplaces in Italian cuisine in class."

“I think it's very relevant given current Italian politics and the return to the far right in Europe and the U.S., and for where we can look for these signs of fascism and rebellion starting in the home,” Tocco said.

Emily Whittington, a student in the gastronomy master's degree program, said she found the significance of the government's kitchen redesign interesting, “It just shows how every facet of life, every room or food, has a purpose and a reason behind it.”

Garvin emphasized the importance of analyzing the small details of food and domestic work as a form of protest, in the framework of both Italian fascism of the 20th century, and the rise of far right leaders today.

“If we understand the symbolic, historical origins of food, we can decide to use or misuse those [symbols] going forward.” Garvin said. “Kitchens matter, they're a place where memories are written.”