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The recipe: the queen of pragmatics. An Italian case study

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate the communicative status and the daily practices of use of the recipe in the broader context of cooking and eating inside the home. My thesis is that the recipe should be regarded as the queen of pragmatics of communication, as recipes are to be found in homes all over the world. I draw on two different research projects: the first study reports upon semi-structured interviews with 137 respondents living in the North East of Italy. The second study presents and discusses the most important categories of meaning that emerged from a content analysis of 398 messages posted on the online cooking forum of the site of *Donna Moderna* [*Modern Woman*], the most widely read women's weekly magazine in Italy.

Keywords: recipe, food, cuisine, art, pragmatics of communication

La recette: la reine de la pragmatique. Un cas d'étude italien

Résumé : Le but de cette étude est d'examiner la communication et les pratiques quotidiennes de l'usage de la recette dans le contexte plus large de la cuisine à l'intérieur de la maison. La thèse que je formule est que la recette doit être considérée comme la reine de la pragmatique de la communication puisque les recettes se retrouvent dans les foyers du monde entier. Pour cela, je m'appuie sur deux projets de recherche différents: le premier présente et discute des entretiens semi-structurés avec 137 répondants qui vivent dans le nord-est de l'Italie et le deuxième examine les catégories les plus importantes de sens qui ont émergé à partir d'une analyse du contenu des 398 messages postés sur le forum en ligne dédié à la cuisine sur le site de *Donna Moderna*, le hebdomadaire le plus largement lu par les femmes en Italie.

Mots-clés : recette, nourriture, cuisine, art, travaux ménagers, pragmatique de la communication

Introduction¹

The aim of this study is to explore the meaning of recipes, which, according to Goldstein (2010) “are windows into the ways people live, think, and aspire. Recipes carry cultural, historical, even political, baggage.” In the present exploratory study (Yin, 1993), I focus my attention mainly on analysing the communicative nature of recipes, their “life experience” and practices of use in the broader context of cooking and eating in Italy. Italy is a country where food defines much of what is desirable in Italian lifestyle (Harper & Faccioli, 2009). I am indeed convinced that the study of a seemingly “minor” feature of cuisine such as the recipe can bring out important elements in the food culture, in the meaning of housework, as well as of women’s living conditions. I am also convinced that studying the recipe through what common people have to say in its concern can advance knowledge on social and cultural studies about food and cuisine. If we consider the recipe as a cultural object and we analyse it by referring to the heuristic instrument of the ‘cultural diamond’ proposed by Griswold (1994), of the four poles identified by her –cultural object, creator, receiver and the social world- we can note that the pole which is less illuminated by empirical research is the pole of receiver. Actually, the axe creator-receiver is the most unhooked from current theories and research on users as contemporary approaches theorize a fusion between these two poles in a unique figure: the producer (Bruns, 2008). Counting on a higher level of education, now users are informed, often competent and able to produce directly by themselves what they later on will use. Consequently, although women continue to be the bulwark of food preparation in the family, in the case of adults those who consume (in our case eat) tend more than in the past to coincide with those who cook.

With this bottom up study, I want to contribute to fill this gap by exploring opinions and behaviours of lay people on the conceptualization of the recipe and relate practices of use. I am in fact convinced that a study like this, based on the theoretical framework outlined by Bourdieu (1990) on the practices of use is revelatory of the real relationship between society and cuisine as well as food, and can bring new knowledge on the recipe and suggest new questions. The research questions addressed in the first project are: RQ1: Which kind of text is the recipe on communicative level? RQ2: What is its role in learning to cook? The research question addressed in the second project is: RQ3: How common people, those who are engaged in popular cuisine, live and experience the recipe and in general the food discourse in the broader context of cooking and eating inside the home? The findings hopefully will provide insights for the research community on the recipe as well as the preparation and consumption of food in daily life.

So far, literature on food and cuisine has led to conceptualize recipes as reflecting the blending of three dimensions: work, art and communication (Curtin, 1992; Heldke, 1992; Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). Cooking, which derives in many cases from the execution of a recipe, is an important social activity, which, like

¹ I would like to thank Naomi Baron and Michael Cooke for their invaluable help in revising this text.

fashion, serves to 'make society' and is, therefore, a powerful seismograph of the spirit of the time. In particular, at the macro-sociological level, cooking has been seen as one of the fundamental domestic processes taking place in the home (Dalla Costa, 1973). This process, like other processes of the domestic sphere such as clothing, cleaning, maintaining the home, and caring for the sick or disabled, has traditionally been placed somewhere between unpaid domestic labour and the labour market, via the service sector (Fortunati, 1981). At the heart of domestic production, cooking brings us to the issue of domestic work, which is mainly done by women, not contracted and unpaid (DeVault, 1994). Domestic work leads in turn to the persistence of a still largely unequal division of domestic chores between men and women (Bonke, 2004). Depending upon the particular historical period, people have applied various strategies for getting hold of food, e.g., by producing it all themselves or at least some of it; by deciding at what stage the food they need must be precooked, frozen, pre-prepared, etc.; and by determining which elements — and how many — remain to be worked on at home (in order to transform what they have bought into something ready to be eaten). Cooking, when it is removed from the home and entrusted to the market, generally entails moments of public sharing of food in restaurants, pizzerias, bars or canteens, where people eat in a dimension in which the private and social converge (Warde & Martens, 2000).

At micro level, the works by Douglas (1972), Barthes (1970) and Bourdieu (1979) have stressed the cultural, symbolic, aesthetic and economic importance of food in terms of social structures, meanings, boundaries and negotiations among people. Eating presupposes a variety of elements: culture of the food and its symbolic meaning; culinary art; changes in work and everyday consumption; and dissemination of scientific and practical knowledge (Sutton, 2013), which is more or less applied to the improvement of the quality of life. Durand (1960) highlights how food symbolization implicitly contains the concepts of assimilation, phagocytizing and metabolism of reality. In 1986, Harris has written an interesting exploration of the enigmas of taste. In the same year, Hillman and Boer, and, more recently, Harrus-Révidi (1994) and Appiani (2000, p. 43), have shown how the visual enunciation of sexual and emotional life is expressed through food metaphors (Fernandez, 1973). Although chemistry and physics underlie food preparation, in the process of preparing food, there is also undeniably the presence of an art and magic. According to Appiani (2000, p. 117), cooking is a process of alchemical transformation, which allows us to pass from material reality to the immaterial sphere.

The relationship between art and food is summed up in the phrase 'beautiful to eat', to build upon the title of Marvin Harris's (1985) *Good to eat: Riddles of food and culture* (1985). Famous painters have depicted different types of meals from breakfast to lunch, snacks and dinner, as well as painting still lifes of different types of food objects. They have also portrayed public and private moments of communal eating. But in addition, art has come to challenge and even re-conceptualize the daily ritual of the meal, reinventing its content and meaning (Salaris, 2000). How can we forget Marinetti's 1910 'upside-down dinner?' After Marinetti's work, art

has not considered food and cooking simply as a minor artwork but in a certain way has inscribed cuisine into great art.

Artistic creativity focusing on the body has also looked at the body that eats, as well as the moments at which food is produced, presented and consumed. I allude here to the works of Ugo Nespolo from *Magnatutto* [Eat everything], *Still life and Arlecchino* to *Electronic Greediness* (Caprile, 1992), and to *The Book of Food* by Vanessa Beecroft, exhibited in 1993. After ten years, the artist staged, at the Castello di Rivoli, a performance of *VB52*: a colourful dinner for thirty-two ladies, who slowly tasted coloured courses: to start, completely orange food; then white, green and so on. For many centuries, artists and authors from Petronius to Karen Blixen have observed and investigated the relationship between food and cooking. If the Surrealist Tristan Tzara was deeply convinced that ‘thinking comes from the mouth’, Dalí was just as sure that human beings think with the stomach, because they are what they eat, digest and assimilate.

Finally, considering the communicative dimension of the cuisine, we cannot but mention Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. The first argued that the cuisine of a society, including food rituals and relationships with food, is a *language* into which each society unconsciously translates its structure or even reveals its contradictions (Lévi-Strauss, 1971, p.191). The second stressed the importance of looking at the food traits and habits as a true *communication system* (Barthes, 2013). A place where these three dimensions – work, art and communication - are often conveyed is the recipe. However, the communicative and linguistic aspects of the recipe have not been sufficiently investigated, at least so far. Hence, I will devote next section to a specific reflection on the communicative aspects of the recipe.

1. The communicative nature and practices of the use of the recipe

The recipe marks the border between the written, the made and the eaten (Ricci & Ciccarelli, 2000). It collects, hands down through the generations and constantly renews the scientific and practical knowledge, expertise, intuition, creativity, good taste and artistic sense, which many (still mostly women) draw upon when preparing something to eat (Curtis, 1992; Heldke, 1992). It may be the most widely disseminated text at a communicative level, although probably not the most widely read. Connected to cooking, and therefore to work and daily consumption (Graeber, 2011), it is an important presence in many homes. It is for this reason that the recipe can be considered the queen of pragmatics, with the term ‘pragmatics’ being used here to indicate how and for what purposes language is used in practice (Levinson, 1983; Batocchio & Casetti, 1995). From a linguistic point of view, the text of the recipe is usually *regulative or prescriptive* (Migliari, 1992), as the analysis of the verbal tenses and moods in recipes shows. The most widely used mood is the imperative (presupposing a second-person subject). Alternatively, infinite verb forms are sometimes used, constituting a form of courtesy towards the reader. Being a prescriptive text, the communicative modality of the recipe is to give instructions and

suggestions for combining and ‘treating’ the food in a certain way. Consequently, the recipe is a kind of algorithm that describes a procedure for combining some elements and transforming them, almost through cooking. Cooking is important because, as Lévi-Strauss wrote (1964 Italian Translation, 1966, p.61): ‘the axis connecting the cooked and the raw is characteristic of the culture, while that which unites the raw and the rotten is characteristic of nature, since cooking accomplishes the cultural transformation of food, while decay is its natural transformation.’ However, cooking does not accompany always the food we eat: see, for instance, dishes whose ingredients remain raw.

From the perspective of Jakobson’s language functions (1973), the text of the recipe is *conative*, i.e. the message is focused on the reader rather than on the writer, who is usually anonymous (Bruni & Raso, 2002). The fact that recipes are anonymous poses the problem of copyright. Heldke (1992a) argues that recipe authorship and ownership challenge both scholars and cook book writers to think about their responsibility towards those who invented the recipes they appropriate. The language of the recipe is technical and often local (in Italy, for example, the herb valerian in some regions is called *songino*). The semantic field of recipes, however, is in perpetual turmoil, as industrial and commercial factors, as well as advertising, lead to one word (generally, the name of an ingredient) taking over from another. The fact that the text of the recipe is more focused on the reader than on the writer probably explains also why it does not aim to produce the execution of a mental plan, but rather to inspire what Ingold (2001) calls the mobilization of mind/body within a certain environment. The recipe puts in motion a combined activity of the mind/body, in which a constant and shifting use of judgment and dexterity is required.

Linguistically, the text of the recipe tends to be more *denotative* than connotative, as it usually does not use words that express the qualities of the objects mentioned. Furthermore, the recipe does not apply formulas for opening and closing, and enters without preamble into the subject. In fact, a recipe usually ends without a finale, even if sometimes there are final instructions, such as ‘serve cold or hot,’ or ‘garnish the dish with ...’

The recipe usually follows a ritualized structure, which is divided into several sections and uses a series of fixed, formulaic expressions and wording such as ‘season to taste’, ‘in a saucepan put the butter and the oil...’, ‘cook over a low heat for at least ...’. The function of formulaic expressions is to facilitate the recognition and memorization of the various cooking procedures and at the same time to live space to the creativity and subjectivity of the cook.

Curiously, the recipe does not describe the entire process related to feeding, which remains invisible. The recipe limits itself to a particular place (the kitchen) and a precise time (the time of the situated action – see Leudar & Costall, 1996-, whereby the chosen nourishments are combined and cooked) (Appiani, 2000). Just because it delineates a space, the recipe does not always provide instructions on the before and

after. In fact, in many cases, recipes do not contain such instructions at all (for example, on how to buy the ingredients or how to taste the dishes prepared). As Ingold (2001, p.11) argues, the recipe limits itself to provide some “critical junctures” in the process, but then it is up to the cook to “find her way around”.

Because it has a limited goal, the recipe may lead to misunderstandings, such as that the process of feeding has its epilogue in the dish. On the contrary, with the dish ready and steaming, the process of feeding continues with a bridging phase that requires other activities, such as the preparation of the table, administration of the food and the eating of the food itself, with all its procedures and good manners. However, these issues open up another type of discourse, which will not be analysed here.

2. Aim, sample and method of study

The aim of this exploratory study is to investigate the communicative nature of the recipe and its life experience in daily life in Italy among common people. The study of the recipe within the processes of domestic food production and consumption should allow us to better understand its various aspects. Here I draw on two research projects using different methodological approaches, which were carried out in 2003, in a moment in which the Internet was not so diffused, and social networks did not exist, smartphones were not so common, and the television had to discover yet the cuisine “topic”. The insights coming from this study will depict therefore a precise historical moment.

The first study draws on 137 semi-structured interviews, administered to a convenience sample of people living in the North East of Italy and built using the snowball sampling technique. The purpose of these interviews was to understand the following: how people perceive the text of the recipe; the role of the recipe in learning, teaching and updating cooking processes; ways, times and places for recipe consultation; its importance in communication about food; and its relationship with technology and housework. Data were analysed by descriptive techniques (frequency analysis) and by constructing contingency tables derived from crossing observed variables with some socio-demographic variables, such as gender and age, and the variable ‘culinary competence.’ Then an inferential analysis was applied using the χ^2 test.²

The second study draws on the 398 messages appearing on a forum devoted to cuisine of the website of *Donna Moderna* [*Modern Woman*], the most widely read women’s weekly magazine in Italy. The study reports on qualitative content analysis

² Where the relationships were significant, the analysis was deepened by applying bivariate log-linear models. The purpose of this analysis was to better understand the associations at the root of the significance indicated by the test of χ^2 . While the tables in the text show, for both the variables involved, the items ‘NR’, and ‘I do not know’ considered cumulatively, the log-linear analysis was applied without considering them.

of the relate content. Content analysis was used to assess the texts: the goal of this analysis was to identify the most important discourse related categories of meaning that the participants in this forum (mostly women) used when referring to recipes and, more generally, to cuisine and cooking. (Altheide, 1996; Silverman, 1997; McNeill & Chapman, 2005). With this qualitative content analysis (which is a notably non-intrusive and flexible methodology), I could trace a conceptual map of participants' living experience of the recipe and, more generally, of cuisine and cooking.

The remainder of the present article is organized as follows. First, I explore the perception of the text of the recipe on the part of respondents and, second, the relationship between the recipe and its application, namely cooking. Thirdly, I analyse the role of the recipe in learning how to cook, and examine the relationship between the recipe and culinary communication as a whole. I conclude the paper with a final discussion of the main results.

3. The perception of the text of the recipe

In the first study, the text of the recipe appears to be easily understandable to the majority of the respondents. Although men seem to find recipes a little less easy to follow than women this difference is not significant, although recipes belong to a primarily feminine, oral tradition. One of the features of recipe is that the work process to be performed is not always described in detail. Nearly half of respondents complain about the lack of clarity in general, and, in particular, more than a third complain about a lack of clarity specifically related to quantities. (However, this latter perception decreases in correspondence with the rising of the respondents' age; $\chi^2_{(2)}=8.34$, $p<0.05$). That the precise measurement is not the major concern of the writer a recipe is beyond doubt. But on this point I will return later.

The lack of clarity is also related to the fact that the recipe is a text that calls for common sense and trial and error (Heldke, 1992a, p.254-55). Without continuing and widespread experimentation, there cannot be a great culinary culture. Hence, the recipe is a text designed not to be taken literally. It must be applied by adapting and accommodating it to personal taste and interpreted according to the culinary culture of the moment. This issue is also reflected in my findings. In fact, only a bit more than a third of our respondents faithfully apply recipes, one-third say they are "inspired" by them, less than a fifth report that at times they are only guided by recipes while at others they depart from them, and, finally, very few re-invent recipes completely. It is paramount that unlike other instruction manuals that require a faithful execution of their content, the recipe encourages reinvention of the elements that outline the production process. Hence, there develops a dialectic between the *official and unofficial text* that passes through the personalization of the recipe.

The free interpretation and ongoing adjustment of the recipe may arise, as suggested above, from the very essence of the recipe itself. Yet such adaptation also results

from the widespread habit of not reading the recipe just prior to applying it. When asked 'how many times do you read the recipes?', just over one-third of the respondents said they consult recipes often or very often ('always' only in very few cases), while half of the respondents said that they rarely do so, and less than a fifth said they never do. Hence, a recipe is a text that tends to be read only one time and then stored in the memory. This finding confirms what Heldke argued in 1992: the recipe "acts more as memory-jogs for previous knowledge" (Heldke, 1992, p. 219). The communicative nature of the recipe text is not perceived by the respondents in a uniform way. Almost *half* of the respondents describe it as an *operational/normative* text. In particular, this group defines it as: 'an algorithm', 'regulatory, prescriptive', 'regulative', 'cold', 'objective', 'like a drug leaflet' and so on. However, a *fifth* consider it as a *descriptive* text: It 'is the description of a process,' 'a list of ingredients and methods, illustrative and informative.' *Less than a fifth* speak of it as a *teaching* text: 'an instruction manual, a technical manual, a macro text'. Finally, less than a fifth define the recipe as a *narrative* text: a 'travel diary', a 'sub-literary product', and so forth. This multi-layered and contradictory dimension of the recipe seems to depend on the imagination, sensibility, proactivity, rhetoric of the user. It is the other side of the coin: that cooking is more often learned through embodied experience (Sutton, 2013).

But when asked if the recipe is more artistic or more scientific, *half* of the respondents state that it is an *artistic* text, a *fifth* see it as *scientific*, while nearly *another fifth* claim to perceive it *both* as scientific and artistic. The preponderance of the artistic perspective in perceiving recipes is explained by the vast majority of respondents in terms of the *strong evocative power* of the recipe, which comes from common knowledge of the smells associated with nourishment and, therefore, from the gustatory and olfactory synaesthesia evoked by the description of food. But it also stems from the fact that this evocation may be connected to fascination with distant lands where spices and certain exotic vegetables and fruits come from (Schivelbusch, 1992). Thus, the recipe conjures up the world of exotic routes, because it contains within itself the history of the hybridization of food, its import and circulation (Appadurai, 1986). It has been many centuries since science, art and culinary traditions worked together towards building a global food culture. As Maffesoli argues (1988), while contemporary societies tend to organize themselves into tribes, objects do the opposite: they have a long tradition of globalization (Debray, 1992). Think of how spices, fruits, greens, leguminous seeds, and vegetables have been circulating around the world and have had the effect to bring people together. Zeldin (1998, p. 95) argues that "all culinary progress has been dependent on the assimilation of foreign foods and condiments, which are transformed in the process." When people eat, they eat the world, and cuisine, like fashion, increasingly strengthens its exotic inspiration.

The influence of various ethnic communities and groups on food contributes not only to developing variability in eating habits (Simmel, 1919, p. 34), but also to the integration and diverse composition of the population. In the past, food and cuisine

were more localized than fabrics and clothing. Climatic and geographical factors have had a more constraining influence on culinary behaviour than on styles of dress, partly because supplying food stuffs (which may be perishable or lose their flavour) requires a shorter time window than for clothing. On the other hand, global food easily loses its original identity to assume one impressed by the exoticism of the place where it is bought, stored, cooked and eaten.

Prominence of the artistic aspect over the scientific in subjects' responses is probably also due to the fact that, unlike what happens in chemical and physical experiments, measurement in recipes reveals a more narrative than scientific character. The recipe often gives inaccurate measures, as in the expressions 'season to taste', a 'handful' of parsley, a 'pinch' of nutmeg and so on. The measures are imprecise because many recipes come from oral traditions, and because in homes there have often been no tools of measurement. There are instead cups, glasses and spoons, i.e. utensils which, though primarily containers, can also serve for measuring. However, these utensils, having different capacities, measure in a non-standardized way. But this is not a serious limit, since an exact measure is often not necessary. There is generally some discretion in the use of a many ingredients, which means that the preparation of dishes tolerates substantial margins of approximation in measuring the ingredients. It is worth noting that Italy, the country where this study has been carried out, was not lapped by the domestic science movement that in the US had made of standardization and measurement key components of its project (Shapiro, 1986).

By investigating further what common knowledge considers to be 'artistic' in a recipe, it emerged that, in addition to the evocative power of the text, another important element is the *combinatorial art*, i.e. the ability, celebrated in the recipe, to combine smells, flavours and colours (Teti, 1999). An additional artistic factor is *presentation*, i.e., decoration, garnishes to the final product, and its colour. Art teaches us that food is also a wonder to eat with the eyes, even before being tasted on the palate or assimilated by the body (Appiani, 2000, p.11). Almost one-third of respondents also cite the importance of how food is prepared, including 'how food is dealt with', 'doses improvised', 'spices used' and so on. Moreover, it is interesting to note that, while male participants in the survey seem to see the artistic element of the recipes more in the preparation, women perceive it in the *words of the recipe*, in the *dish itself*, in its presentation and in combinatorial art (Table 1).

Table 1. *What is artistic about the recipes? by gender*

| Element | Gender | | Total |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Male | Female | |
| Preparation | 21 (33.3%) | 19 (25.7%) | 40 (29.2%) |
| Text | 13 (20.6%) | 23 (31.1%) | 36 (26.3%) |
| Combinatorial art | 13 (20.6%) | 14 (18.9%) | 27 (19.7%) |
| Result | 12 (19.0%) | 20 (27.0%) | 32 (23.4%) |
| Presentation of the dish | 12 (19.0%) | 18 (24.3%) | 30 (21.9%) |
| Base | 63 | 74 | 137 |

This was an open question that received 165 valid answers (base=137). These answers were coded after the application of a content analysis.

Another question in the survey involved the context in which the recipes are read. I asked the respondents, ‘Did you like to read the recipes for pleasure?’ *More than a third* of respondents said they *love reading recipes* without actually making anything that is *just for the pleasure of reading them*. It is mainly those who love to cook ($\chi^2_{(1)}=5.07$, $p<0.05$) and those who are 40 years old or older who develop a relationship of symbolic enjoyment with the recipe ($\chi^2_{(2)}=8.55$, $p<0.05$). What attracts the readers in a recipe? Generally, according to traditional literature (Brillat-Savarin, 1825), the answer would be: the surprising narrative on the food and the pleasure of taste. Barilli observes that “as well as any other aesthetic experience, or any work of art, a meal can be lodged in the coordinates of a classic taste or baroque or simple-rural or sophisticated-decadent and so on” (1989, p. 51). My respondents, more prosaically, claim that they are affected by several elements in a recipe: the ingredients, image/photo of the dish, combination of tastes, simplicity, presentation and description of the preparation (see also Heldke, 1992b).

4. The recipes and the cooking

Women remain the hub of the household and cooking, in the sense that responsibility for feeding a family is still largely the woman’s (Bonke, 2004). Even in their answers to the question ‘Who helps you with the cooking?’ *more than a third* of respondents replied their *mother*. A *fifth* said their *spouse*, and another *fifth* named

other figures such as *relatives, boyfriends, friends, flatmates*. However, of various household chores cooking is the one that has seen in recent times more raids by the masculine world (Kemmer, 2000). It is important also noting that the way in which women cook has changed considerably over time: first, as a result of the increasing number of women who work outside the home; second, owing to the complexity of the coordination and organization of domestic work; and third, as a consequence of women’s resistance towards housework itself. All of these processes have produced a rationalization and compression of domestic work, which, in turn, has produced the *modernization of the recipe text*.

The main historical change in the recipe, which reflects this process of modernization, might be found in the fact that *new information* has been introduced into the text, including the *overall time* it takes to prepare different dishes (a crucial issue today because time is a scarce resource, especially for women), *the difficulty of the work required*, and the *calories* contained in the dishes. This last element points to the hidden nature of the chemical structure of food. If physics weighs the food in terms of grams and kilos, chemistry reveals into how many calories the ingredients are transformed in our body, whether they contain amino acids or/and proteins, vitamins etc. However, in addition to the items already mentioned, modern recipe contributions also incorporate *ethnic/exotic ingredients, unusual combinations, novel tools/technologies, new styles of presentation, the diffusion of diet food* and so on.

Moreover, the recipes transform themselves, following the *increased use of semi-finished products: frozen, precooked, pre-washed and pre-prepared food*. It is in this way that abstract and simple work, to use Marx’s words, increases at a domestic level. The penetration of these products into culinary practice seems unstoppable. The majority of respondents indicated that they use frozen food. More than one-third use pre-cooked food, one-third use pre-prepared foods, and one-fifth use pre-washed items. More men than women use pre-prepared foods, while there are no significant gender differences regarding the use of frozen, pre-washed and pre-cooked ingredients ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.43, p < 0.05$) (Table 2).

Table 2. The use of frozen, pre-prepared, pre-cooked and pre-washed foods, by gender

| Use of | Gender | | Total |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| | Male | Female | |
| Frozen | 50 (79.4%) | 61 (82.4%) | 111 (81.0%) |
| Pre-prepared | 26 (41.3%) | 19 (25.7%) | 45 (32.8%) |

| | | | |
|-------------|---------------|---------------|------------|
| Pre-cooked | 24 (38.1%) | 27 (36.5%) | 51 (37.2%) |
| Pre-washed | 9 (14.3%) | 18 (24.3%) | 27 (19.7%) |
| Base | 63 | 74 | 137 |

This was a multiple answer question that received 234 valid answers (base=137).

The modernization of the recipe (and of cuisine in general) reflects the reduction and reorganization of cooking work and hence a saving of effort if compared to the past. This saving is clear in the fact that *one-third* of respondents devote *less than one hour a day to cooking*, a tenth between one and two hours, and very few more than two hours. Almost half of the respondents state that the time they devote to cooking depends on the type of day. In many households *there is a weekly*, not daily, *planning* of domestic work, so people tend to cook on Saturday or Sunday, while on working days they reheat what they prepared over the weekend. Therefore, the reduction of time devoted to cooking does not seem to have brought about a loss of technical competence and practical knowledge in the management of the eating process. Only a third of respondents perceive such a reduction and among these, there are more females ($\chi^2_{(1)}=6.99$, $p<0.01$). In fact, competence in cooking is quite high among these respondents. More than half say they know how to make lasagne, gnocchi, a roast and a tart. Such competence is even higher among women, who say they know how to make all these dishes in a significantly higher proportion than men.³ (To cook a roast, however, seems to be something that one learns gradually with age: $\chi^2_{(2)}=7.37$, $p<0.05$). On the other hand, the modernization of recipes has made it possible to carry on the older culinary tradition, combining practical knowledge (Schlanger, 1990), science and mass media.

At the same time, modernization means also the *proliferation of the communicative supports* in which a recipe can be found. A quarter of the respondents read cooking magazines, especially women ($\chi^2_{(1)}=22.72$, $p<0.001$) and those with more cooking experience ($\chi^2_{(2)}=12.57$, $p<0.01$). Only less than a fifth of respondents use the Internet for this purpose. The most interesting finding is represented by the 41.6% of respondents claiming to follow cooking programmes on TV, among whom women are significantly more numerous than men ($\chi^2_{(1)}=8.17$, $p<0.01$). However, the old practice of exchanging recipes among friends is still common for about half of the respondents, although a higher number of women do this than men ($\chi^2_{(1)}=17.17$, $p<0.001$), and the greater the culinary competence there is, the more frequently the exchange of recipes occurs ($\chi^2_{(2)}=20.42$, $p<0.001$).

³ For the association between gender and knowing how to make a lasagne $\chi^2_{(1)}=27.10$, $p<0.001$; gnocchi $\chi^2_{(1)}=5.34$, $p<0.05$; a roast $\chi^2_{(1)}=15.41$, $p<0.001$; a tart $\chi^2_{(1)}=16.90$, $p<0.001$.

Resistance by women towards housework and, in particular, cooking has, however, had the effect, of opening up cooking to men, both at a domestic and societal level. As we already mentioned, cuisine is a sector where several masculine incursions have occurred.⁴ The present research also shows that a certain number of men love cooking, even though there continues to be a significantly higher number of women who claim to be cooking aficionados ($\chi^2_{(2)}=5.69$, $p<0.05$).

As only about half of the respondents claim to love reading recipes, it is clear that the pleasure of preparing lunch or dinner is more widespread than the pleasure of reading recipes. However, *the more that respondents claim to cook, the more they report loving cooking and reading recipes, and the more frequently they look up recipes.*⁵ The majority of respondents indicate that recipes help when they do not know what to prepare. If one of the most exhausting aspects of making something to eat is planning what to do, then doing so at least twice a day becomes a recurring nightmare for many women. In fact, this concern is more frequent for women than for men ($\chi^2_{(1)}=6.34$, $p<0.05$).

Given the fact that inspiration, imagination and creativity are often not available on demand, the need for daily planning constricts the artistry and creativity of the culinary experience, turning them into habit and repetition. What is worse, although revised and modernized, recipes continue to refer to only some of the activity involved in producing meals. The recipe says nothing about the waste to be disposed of, the washing-up process, laying the table, the purchase and consumption of food, or the processes of outsourcing domestic work related to eating.

Recipes continue to say little about which technologies should be used in the cooking process. However, when asked ‘Which items do you use most frequently when you cook?’ the answers of the interviewees were, in descending order: the oven, a blender, pots and pans, the food processor and the microwave oven, the mixer, the dipper, the beater, the whisk, a knife and crockery, the refrigerator, the lemon squeezer and the scales. A special case is the pressure cooker, which has even given rise to many collections of recipes based on its use. Only two respondents were aware that hands are a fundamental tool in the kitchen to mix, press, break, coat, gather, chop, knead and measure. No one cited the tongue and the nose as precious tools to check the progress of the dish and make the constant adjustments that are needed (Sutton, 2013).

Following modernization of the recipe, do people eat better or worse than 20 years ago? There is not much agreement in the respondents’ responses: *more than a third*

⁴ But while women attribute great honors to men when they enter into feminine territories, it does not happen the other way round. When women make some incursions into masculine territories they are treated by men as apprentices or neophytes and the sector after a while begins to be devalued (Sullerot, 1966).

⁵ For the association between knowing how to cook and loving to cook $\chi^2_{(2)}=25.27$, $p<0.001$; loving to read the recipes $\chi^2_{(4)}=15.29$, $p<0.005$; frequency of looking them up $t=-4.17$, $df\ 130$, $p<0.001$.

answered that today we eat better, a third think worse, the others perceive no change, or think that we eat differently, or believe that it is in some ways better and in others worse.

5. The role of recipes in learning to cook

Recipes have an important role in teaching people how to cook. After the 1960s there was a break in the roles traditionally considered to be feminine, such as passing on cooking skills. Mothers changed their attitudes towards their daughters, and instead of teaching them to cook, they encouraged them to free up their time and study (Fortunati, 1993). Many scholars agree that modern society is characterized by the lack of cooking apprenticeship and therefore cooking seems to be socially disembedded and disembodied (Sutton, 2013). However, on the current learning experience of cooking there is minimal investigation. How do people learn to cook in the various societies, who teaches them and how, is an under-researched issue (Herzfeld, 1995). The picture which emerges today from these interviews seems rather different. With regard to cooking, the passing on of skills seems to be the norm again: *more than third* of the respondents state that they learned to cook *before the age of thirteen*, another *more than third during their adolescence*, and *less than a fifth as adults*. The average age at which respondents said they had learned to cook is 16.5 years, with no significant difference between males and females (as highlighted by the t-test for independent samples).

How did the respondents learn to cook? Subjects' responses suggest there was more than one mode of learning. To begin with, almost all the respondents used *self-learning*. In more than half of cases, the interviewees also state that they learned to cook from their mother, grandmother or other relatives. Thus, when there is transmission of knowledge about cooking, it seems to occur mainly through the female line. Recipes are handed down in written form and read rather than learnt from watching television. In fact, only one interviewee said that he had learned from the TV. Formal learning was almost non-existent, since only two respondents said they have taken cooking courses, and one only said that he had learned at school (all three males). There are also those who admit that they do not know how to cook, although they are rare. It is interesting to note that self-learning affects males and females equally, while there are more women who claim to have learnt from a relative or from the media (Table 3).

Table 3. Modes of learning by gender

| Modes | Gender | | Total |
|---------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| | Male | Female | |
| Base | 63 | 74 | 137 |
| Self-learning | 57 (90.5%) | 68 (91.9%) | 125 (91.2%) |
| From someone else | 27 (42.9%) | 48 (64.9%) | 75 (54.7%) |
| From the media | 3 (4.8%) | 15 (20.3%) | 18 (13.1%) |
| From cookery courses | 3 (4.8%) | 0 (0.0%) | 3 (2.2%) |
| I do not know how to cook | 9 (14.3%) | 5 (6.8%) | 14 (10.2%) |
| Total | 99 | 136 | 235 |

This was an open question and the answers (n = 235) were coded after which a content analysis was applied.

This data suggest that *the role of the recipe is modest with respect to subjects learning how to cook*. The recipe takes on considerable importance at a later time, when cooking skills mature. Almost half of respondents said that learning to cook leads to the construction of their own book of recipes, or the choice of a published book. There are still more women than men who have their own book of recipes ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 21.01, p < 0.001$), and the greater the age or the greater the cooking know-how, the more frequently the respondents have a book of recipes ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 14.94, p < 0.001$). In few cases this may even be a handwritten book, especially among those of mature age ($\chi^2_{(4)} = 20.80, p < 0.001$), and always when the culinary expertise is high ($\chi^2_{(4)} = 15.43, p < 0.01$).

6. The recipe and culinary communication

The transition from the oral tradition to the text of a recipe occurred as the result of the increase in women's education, but historically, recipes were often hand written as they were commonly seen as too domestic to be printed. In recent decades, we have seen, instead, an increase in culinary publications: not only have many cook-books come out, but cooking magazines continue to proliferate. (Those most com-

monly read by my respondents are: *Sale e Pepe* [Salt and Pepper], *Donna Moderna* [Modern Woman], *Cucina Moderna* [Modern Cuisine], *Cucinare Bene* [Cooking Well].) Many television programmes are devoted to cooking, and have large audiences. The success of television cooking programmes reflects, in part, the fact that TV shows can demonstrate the actual process of food preparation, unlike static recipes, in which cooking procedures are sometimes not particularly clear.

Google reports 375,000,000 hits for the word 'recipe' and 624,000,000 for the keyword 'cooking'. In addition to providing information, some of the associated websites host chat forums on the art of cooking, facilitating the exchange of recipes.

My second study was aimed to extract what pro-sumers say about recipe and cooking in a forum related to cooking on the website *Donna Moderna* [Modern Woman]. This forum that was analysed within the SIGIS project, addresses various organizational and professional issues relating to the recipe and in general cooking. The recipe however emerges here and there as peripheral topic of interest among many other elements that contribute to a general discourse on food, cooking and in general on culinary communication. There are young girls who enter the world of cooking with questions such as 'How can I use laurel?' There are also readers who hold forth on such topics as: strategies to combat lime scale (how to clean a kettle), the diffusion of allergies and food intolerances (which create problems for those who have to do the cooking), sustainable and fair-trade food, Slow Food, and many more.

A very popular theme that develops around recipes is technology: For examples, contributors post such messages as, 'I have to change the dishwasher, among all the technologies what is the appliance which you could not do without?', 'Microwave devices? Yes or no? Deep-fat fryers?' and so on.

Another important issue which is indirectly connected to the type of recipe to choose is money: 'How much do you spend on average per week?' (responses range from 25 to 120 euros a week). And finally, the work itself: 'Can cooking be a pleasure if my family thinks that our house is like a restaurant; if one wants pasta, while another wants meat, if I cannot put onion or garlic in the sauce for yet another, another one does not eat raw vegetables, and no one ever thanks me? ...' 'Is cooking a duty or a pleasure?' (the majority of the replies say that it is a duty).

The search for local or regional food is very common topic among readers (mostly women), who may want to track down the recipe for something they enjoyed on a trip to another area. In Italy, there is a rich tradition of regional and local cuisine, and the preservation of recipes, dishes and their preparation is an important issue for the users of this forum. However, discussion of local cuisine coexists with postings on multi-ethnic cuisine (the tasty side of globalization), and both become entangled around the larger discourse on Italian cuisine and recipes.

On the *Donna Moderna* website, *discussion of recipes is intermingled with that of menus*. Although the recipe is the queen of the culinary discourse, the menu is another important bulwark, whereby it deserves a certain attention. For these users, the

general need to invent and submit an increasingly sophisticated, persuasive and attractive culinary discourse is what has pushed also the creation of a true literature of the menu. In effect, the ability to vary, change and describe in words, always in a different way, ingredients and dishes is the implicit driver behind the evocative power and literary imagination of many modern menus. In reality, this imaginative power owes much to Futurists (Salaris, 2000). As is well known, they, more than any other artistic vanguard, sought to revolutionise daily life, proposing radical changes in several domains including that of cooking. They may well have fought arbitrarily and bizarrely against dull communication about food, and against the repetition of domestic cooking routines, but it is also true that with their manifesto against *pastasciutta*, they have declared war against ordinary daily menu. And in the restaurant industry, it is through the menu that each restaurant informs customers about the dishes that they can offer (Finkelstein, 1989). The menu, more than the recipe, becomes the intangible container, the semantic cocoon that surrounds and informs the dish for stimulating the appetite or to satisfy gluttony in the public sphere.

In hindsight, gluttony is one of the most common sins, as dreams and fantasies of swallowing are present in myths, traditions and folktales all around the world (Propp, 1975). Let me come back to the first study for reporting what my interviewees answered when I asked ‘How does the menu inspire you?’ About one-fifth of the respondents to the semi-structured interview reply that it stimulates appetite, the classic mouth-watering. A quarter claimed to have positive emotions such as happiness, curiosity, satisfaction, and so on. Only a few say they experience negative emotions such as anxiety and indecision, whereas for about one-fifth of respondents, the menu stimulates the desire to choose strange foods or to try things that they have never eaten before.

In addition to discussion of recipes and menus, the website postings included discussion of *everyday conversation that involves food*, which is another important field of culinary communication. This theme was also addressed by my interviewees, since talk about what you eat is quite present in the repertoires of daily conversations. Who has never heard members of their family ask, or asked themselves, such questions as: ‘What is there to eat?’ or ‘When will dinner be ready?’ To explore these discussions about eating, I asked: ‘How and when do your conversations turn to food?’ In general, most respondents thought that talking about food is important for social cohesion, because ‘eating is an issue that unites, the food is good company.’ A fifth of respondents said that the conversation turns to eating during meals, mainly as a strengthening or celebratory practice. A few said that they talk about food when they are hungry as an almost conditioned reflex, and for better managing the hunger itself. Finally, a few others said they talk about eating to informally increase their knowledge, such as when they ask ‘What did you put in it?’, ‘How long did it take to make?’, or ‘How did you make this cake?’

Furthermore, from this first study it emerges that people *speak of eating* through a narrative register, when one wants to remember what one has eaten, or after a deli-

scious dinner or when one talks of one's own culinary creativity. In one-third of cases, interview respondents state that talk about eating involves aspects of daily life: at home, outside home, at the supermarket/when shopping, at work, in the canteen, at festivals, before preparing lunch or dinner, when one goes to a new restaurant, when suddenly one desires something particular to eat, when one asks: 'What should I cook today?', or 'Let's go and eat something!', while deciding which restaurant to go to, while one cooks, in organizing dinners/invitations, or in trying new ideas.

The necessity of speaking about eating, including speaking about one's own tastes and desires, is often solicited by the approach of the fateful hour of the meal, as a *sort of anxiety connected to anticipation*. This behaviour acknowledges how important communication about food is, because in that way, the 'palate of the mind' (Rigotti, 1999) imagines it, tastes it and savours it in advance. The request for information from those who cook has also the aim of *negotiating* what one wants to eat and what one can realistically eat. The prevailing culinary style in a family is the result of a negotiation between the individual tastes of the different members of the family. My survey indicates that this bargaining over what one will eat is present in *more than half* of the respondent homes.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings that have emerged from these two research projects enable me to answer to my three research questions, although in the guise of an impressionistic picture. I recall here the research questions, which are: RQ1: Which kind of text is the recipe on communicative level in the broader context of cooking and eating inside the home? RQ2: What is its role in learning to cook? The research question addressed in the second project is: RQ3: How common people, those who are engaged in popular cuisine, live and experience the recipe and in general the food discourse?

From this research we have learned that the recipe is a pragmatic text and is easily understood, even if the procedures it lays out are not always described in details. This deficiency is typically solved at the level of free interpretation and continuous adjustment of the recipe, but it constitutes also the impetus that pushes many people to use other sources of information, such as TV cooking programs, specialised websites and magazines. The communicative nature of the recipe text is perceived by the subjects in our survey in various ways: operative/regulatory, but also descriptive, narrative and didactic. The perception of the nature of the text of the recipe is ambivalent, although the artistic element prevails by virtue of its textuality and evocative power, the exoticism of the ingredients, the applied combinatorial art and the aesthetic elements of the presentation of the dish. Even the measurements in the recipe reveal themselves to be narrative more than scientific.

Women continue to be the hub of household food preparation, despite having little time to cook (as evidenced by the fact that they often cook on weekends and then

reheat food on working days). But for the respondents, this reduction means that there has been a rationalization of cooking, not a loss of culinary competence. At the same time, the text of the recipe has been modernized, and often includes new information, such as the time required to cook, the calories of the dish and the level of difficulty in preparation. Despite this modernization, the recipe continues to obscure the total labour process required by cooking and to say very little about the technologies needed. A further important finding is that the home cuisine sector has been opened to men.

With regard the role of recipe in learning to cook, this role is quite small as one tends to learn more about cooking by watching and imitating others who cook. Searching for a recipe is more often a culmination of that process. Almost half of the respondents say they have created their own book of recipes, which in many cases are handwritten, or that they have a favourite cook book among the published texts. The more women in the last fifty years have reduced their cooking time, the more they write, publish and read about cooking. But in addition to the recipe and the menu, which is a close relative of the recipe on the social side, there is considerable discussion of food that is part of everyday conversation. One speaks of food as a practice relevant to social cohesion, as a celebratory and consolidating rite to better manage hunger, or as a form of anxiety connected to anticipation. One often speaks through the register of narration, but also through that of negotiation, to bargain for what one would like to eat.

Research on the recipe provides a useful inroad into the real experience of cooking and eating at home. Through exploration of the various artistic and communicative aspects of the recipe, it was possible to outline how domestic cooking has changed over time and what are the most frequent topics of conversation on food and cuisine (see also Ricci & Ciccarelli, 2000).

The main limit of these two research projects is that, given the constraints of the sample selected for the interviews and of the sample of messages analysed, these results are not generalizable. The second constraint is that the subjects were all Italian. This limit must be kept in mind by the reader because cultural assumptions about food are different in other cultural settings (e.g., young people in the US might not learn to cook as much from family members as young people in Italy).

Future research, to overcome the limits mentioned above, should carry out a sociological survey on a representative sample of different populations, with the purpose of analysing, in a more detailed way, the processes of cooking and consumption, as well as the diffusion and use of the recipe at cross-cultural level. Then it should develop further the linguistic analysis of the characteristics of recipe texts to explore them in greater depth. Finally, communication research for investigating more thoroughly the communicative aspect of food — how it is written, spoken and represented — would also be useful to enhance our understanding of the place of the recipe in contemporary cuisine.

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