

## Going Against the Grain: Mussolini's Secret Starch Nemesis

Federico Fellini, an Italian writer, actor, and director once said, "Life is a combination of magic and pasta", and I'm inclined to agree, pasta truly has to be one of life's pure and unfettered joys. Another Italian, philosopher Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, described pasta as a "passéist (archaic, backwards looking) food" that "makes people "heavy, brutish," "skeptical, slow, [and] pessimistic." Yep, you read that right, and it gets even more bizarre than that. See, Marinetti was a prominent philosopher, but of the school of Futurism, which was a school of thought mainly prominent in post-war Europe, and a big factor of Fascist ideology. It mainly faded after the 40s due to Fascism suddenly being rather unfashionable, and anything to do with it being banished to the darker chapters of the annals of history. However, at its peak in the 30s, Futurism and Futurists like Marinetti influenced the ideology of the ruling party of Italy, who were, to put it lightly, completely mental and subjugated the Italian population under the iron grip of *Il Duce*, Benito Mussolini, the creator of Fascism and dictator of Italy. This influence would lead to the unthinkable happening, Italy, the home of classics such as Bolognese, Lasagne, Carbonara, and other delicious pasta dishes, went on a state sponsored campaign to get Italians to reject pasta, blaming it for everything from the weak Italian economy to the downfall of the Roman Empire in the first place.

To look at Futurism, it's important to understand the past. It arose in Italy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, at a time where Italy was a relatively new country, celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1901, with little to no sense of a national identity or direction. The country was deeply economically divided between the more wealthy and industrial north, and the poorer, agricultural south. In the south, education was basically non-existent, and most children worked the land or, if they happened to live in Sicily, in the sulphur mines, which, to put it mildly, wasn't brilliant

for their health. Between 1881 and 1884, 3640 miners in Sicily were tested for their fitness to join the army – only 200 passed the test. Many of them had tuberculosis, not great. With all this, you'd think "oh, but surely the government was competent and strong and determined to do something to fix the backwards state of Italy?" Wrong. The government could barely hold itself together, never mind the country. And to top it all off, the Catholic Church hated the government and basically told all Catholics to hate the newly unified Italian government because they had confiscated church lands during unification. Oh, and the King was assassinated so, fair to say, it wasn't going splendidly for Italy. Of course, faced with this situation, Italians hunkered down and worked hard to improve the country they love- oh wait no, they left for America and Europe. An estimated total of 6.5m Italians left between 1876 and 1926, which represents around 60% of the population in 1876. The diaspora was particularly strong in America, where Italian immigrants brought pizza and pasta to the shores of America. In return, the Americans gave them racism, abuse and rejected housing applications, truly the land of the free and of opportunity.

So, on to Futurism itself, which is, as a philosophy and art movement, on the more abstract and weird side. As stated before, Italy was not in the best of states, so, some theorised, radical action was needed to propel it into being a superpower. The solution, argued Futurists like Marinetti, was to embrace speed, modernity, and technology. So far, not a bad philosophy. However, it also advocated for the abolition of traditional values and the violent destruction of cultural institutions such as museums and libraries. In fact, they were fans of violence in general. After the First World War, Futurism obsessed, as with followers of Fascism, over the idea that the only way to make Italy great 'again', was through violence and ruthless progress at all costs. Unfortunately, the cost was the territorial integrity of its Mediterranean neighbours France, Yugoslavia, Albania, and Greece. Italy would invade these countries

alongside Nazi Germany, who, to put it mildly, aren't really regarded as the 'goodies' of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In short, Futurists hated the past and all its traditions, were rampant nationalists and had a penchant for a large-scale violent upheaval for society, and this, finally, is where the pasta ban comes in.

Italy, as it does now, really *really* loved pasta. It is cheap to make and allows the stretching of other, more expensive ingredients, think how far a smallish portion of meat goes in Bolognese. The trouble is that Italy couldn't, and still can't, grow enough wheat to keep up with the amount of flour that such a large demand for pasta creates. Therefore, Italy imported and imports foreign grain, something which was utterly *appalling* and *unacceptable* to the futurists. Something Italy has no problem growing is rice, which, apart from risotto, Italy isn't particularly known for. Nonetheless, and perhaps naturally, given their above-average penchant for rabid nationalism, the Futurists wanted absolute autarky, self-sufficiency, and therefore campaigned for the rejection of pasta. Pasta embodied everything that futurists hated: it was a symbol of Italy's traditional heritage, relied on foreign products, and (at least, in the opinion of the futurists) made people slow and complacent. Mussolini, dictator of Italy, was on board with this and, much to the dismay of the average nonna, declared a War on Wheat and decreed that November 1<sup>st</sup> was to be a 'National Rice Day', a day in which, unsurprisingly, you were only allowed to eat rice. This went as well as you would expect it to, which is to say, nobody bar the futurists stopped eating pasta. This complete rejection of Marinetti's culinary ideology did not deter him, however, and he wrote a cookbook full of futurist recipes which included delights such as raw sausage marinated in coffee and perfume, and Milk in a Green Light: a large bowl of cold milk, a few teaspoons of honey, many black grapes, and several red radishes illuminated by a green light. Marinetti suggests it be served with a "polibibita" or cocktail of mineral water, beer, and blackberry juice. By the complete lack of any such recipes in the average Italian's

repertoire, it's fair to say that this book, while a dazzling commercial success at the time, made no long-lasting change to the diet of Italy.

After much failed effort by the State to have it succeed, the campaign against pasta failed, the introduction of meals such as caramel balls filled with different ingredients such as dried fruits, raw meat, garlic, mashed banana, chocolate, or pepper failed, even the futurist art movement (which is a whole other story, and just as wild) eventually died out, and this can only lead us to one conclusion. See, Mussolini had succeeded in changing the way that Italian society ran- taking away the right to democracy, free speech, privacy, religious freedom, and freedom of expression of identity, plus more, and, apart from a few notable partisan groups, the Italian populace mainly went along with this. However, when confronted with an attack on their cuisine and food heritage, Italians rejected this and did not comply with the will of the State. Therefore, it is perhaps logical to conclude that you can take an Italian's human rights and civil liberties away, you can oppress them and subject them to ruthless decrees, you can force the country into war and have Italian blood spilled on foreign soil, but you cannot, under any circumstances, at any time, in any way, take away their right to pasta.



Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, probably deep in thought about sausage marinated in Eau de Cologne