

Abstract: This article examines the Sicilian dish *pasta alla Norma* as a case study in culinary canonicity, through a semiotic analysis of its representation in recipes. Drawing from a corpus of regional cookbooks, it explores how the dish is codified via ingredient selection, preparation sequences, and aesthetic presentation. Recipes are treated as programmatic texts: they not only transmit culinary knowledge but also establish and regulate the relationship between normative tradition and social variation. The study argues that the dish's identity is reinforced by a founding anecdote—its myth of origin—which stabilises its expressive form and legitimises its canonical status. Through this lens, *pasta alla Norma* is shown to function as a semiotic object: a model of culinary perfection whose form is ritualised, symbolically charged, and culturally intelligible. In contrast, other aubergine-based pasta recipes are characterised by openness and variability, highlighting the discursive power of the recipe as a site of norm production.

Keywords: Food Semiotics, Cookbooks, Myth of origins, Culinary Tradition, Sicilian Studies

Résumé : Cet article propose une analyse sémiotique de la *pasta alla Norma* comme étude de cas sur la canonicité culinaire, à partir d'un corpus de livres de cuisine siciliens. Il examine comment la recette est codifiée à travers le choix des ingrédients, la séquence des opérations et la présentation esthétique, considérant la recette comme un texte programmeur : elle ne transmet pas seulement un savoir-faire culinaire, mais organise aussi la relation entre tradition normative et variation sociale. L'identité du plat est renforcée par un récit d'origine – un mythe fondateur – qui stabilise sa forme expressive et légitime son statut canonique. Ainsi, la *pasta alla Norma* fonctionne comme un objet sémiotique : un modèle de perfection culinaire, ritualisé, symboliquement chargé et culturellement intelligible. Par contraste, les autres recettes de pâtes à l'aubergine, plus ouvertes et variables, révèlent la puissance discursive de la recette comme dispositif de production normative.

Mots clés : sémiotique alimentaire, livres de cuisine, mythe des origines, tradition culinaire, Sicile

1. Culinary traditions and myth of origins

Sicily, an island at the very heart of the Mediterranean, is today one of Italy's most sought-after destinations for culinary tourism. It is no coincidence that Sicilian cuisine has recently become the subject of a semiotic inquiry into the processes through which regional gastronomic identities are shaped—offering an exemplary case of how a “typical” and identity-defining cuisine is constructed (Giannitrapani & Puca, eds. 2020). Among the island's most internationally celebrated dishes is *pasta alla Norma*, a particular version of pasta with aubergines originating in Eastern Sicily, which has come to symbolise Sicilian cuisine as a whole.

Although aubergines are a seasonal ingredient, *pasta alla Norma* has become so highly requested that you can find it on trattoria menus across Sicily all year round. Even in Palermo, where restaurateurs were initially reluctant to embrace this distinctly Catanese speciality due to longstanding local rivalries, the dish has ultimately prevailed—thanks in no small part to its global popularity.

Opera lovers will likely recognise *Norma* as the title of the celebrated work by composer Vincenzo Bellini, a Catania native. As if this association were not suggestive enough, the word *norma*, when written with a lowercase ‘n’, also literally invokes the idea of a “norm”, introducing a felicitous ambiguity between Bellini's opera and the canonical status of the recipe.

The serving of *pasta alla Norma* is often accompanied by the telling of an anecdote that explains the curious origin of its name. As we shall see, the earliest written version of this story appears to come from Pino Correnti, author of the widely read *Il libro d'oro della cucina e dei vini di Sicilia* (1976). It is therefore worth presenting Correnti's original recipe here in full, complete with the accompanying anecdote.

PASTA CA “NORMA”

Catanese pasta alla “Norma”

Ingredients:

650 g spaghetti or penne; 1 kg ripe tomatoes; 3 small aubergines; 2 cloves of garlic; fresh basil leaves; 150 g grated salted and baked ricotta cheese; olive oil; salt; pepper.

This recipe bursts gloriously with aromas and flavours: spaghetti cooked *al dente*, lifted directly from the pot with a large fork and swiftly drained mid-air before placing it onto the plate. Immediately, sprinkle abundantly with grated salted and baked ricotta (warm up the grater beforehand), followed by a thick layer of freshly-made tomato sauce flavoured with garlic and fresh basil leaves. Finally, top with slices of aubergine, freshly fried in olive oil after draining off their bitter juices. Finish with an extra generous sprinkling of ricotta, because “Norma” in Catania doesn't just mean “music”—it also symbolises the “non plus ultra”, the absolute best. Indeed, the homage paid to Bellini, known as “the Swan of Catania” and composer of *Norma*, has always been boundless. But even if we were to spell “norma” with a lowercase “n”, we would still proclaim: pasta made according to the grand tradition of Catania's ancient gourmands.

“Pari 'na Norma” (“It seems like a Norma”) was—and remains—a popular local expression reflecting the hyperbolic enthusiasm typical of the inhabitants of the city I hold dear. But when exactly did this expression become linked to the famous pasta dish?

In my previous book, I published my own investigation, later cited by several authoritative sources. However, I have not been able to find evidence predating autumn 1920 regarding the origin of this attribution. In that year, a historic lunch took place at the Musco-Pandolfini home in Via Etnea. Angelo Musco, the great Catanese actor and mime, was still unmarried at the time and lived with his beloved sister Anna, who was married to Giuseppe Pandolfini. The couple had two sons: the famous character actor Turi Pandolfini and Janu, who was initially an actor but later the owner of a renowned clothing shop. Janu was married to Saridda D’Urso, and it was in her apartment that Angelo Musco, Turi and Janu Pandolfini, along with well-known playwrights and journalists Nino Martoglio, Pippo Marchese and Peppino Fazio, gathered for lunch.

When Donna Saridda brought to the table a delicious serving of spaghetti with tomato sauce, basil, fried aubergines, and grated salted ricotta, after savouring the first respectful forkfuls, the gallant poet and gourmand Nino Martoglio complimented the cook with these precise words: “Signura Saridda, chista è ’na vera Norma!” (i.e. “Madam Saridda, this is a real Norma!”). Given the presence of such notable journalists and gossipers, the phrase immediately spread along Via Etnea, which has always been the social heart and gossip centre (*curtigghiu*) of Catania. Thus, Nino Martoglio—unforgettable author of *Certona* and of the liveliest Sicilian theatrical comedies—is officially credited with having christened the popular pasta dish “alla Norma”, though, as seems probable, he simply repeated an expression already vividly coined by the people themselves as an indirect but deeply felt homage to Vincenzo Bellini’s art (Correnti 1976: 164-165, translation mine).

How, then, should we approach this culinary baptism? And why devote such significance to it? Surely not to pursue the historical veracity of the anecdote, as if to verify whether Correnti’s account faithfully reflects a real event—an endeavour that gastronomic experts curiously persist in pursuing. Indeed, the scarcity of primary sources on the origins of traditional dishes, combined with the uncontrolled proliferation of diverse culinary practices, makes any quest for historical origin inherently fragile and precarious.

If we set aside philological ambitions, however, a different interpretive route opens up: to consider this anecdote as a *myth of origins*, in the sense proposed by food historian Massimo Montanari (2019)¹²⁶. Drawing on Marc Bloch’s notion of the *idol of origins* (1949), Montanari highlights how traditionalist discourses tend to explain the present through a remote, often mythical, founding moment—what Bloch called an “embryological” view of history. In the case of food, this logic turns a single culinary gesture into a supposed “seed” that determines everything that follows, establishing a linear and unbroken continuity between past and present. Tradition, thus conceived, becomes a static object of transmission, rather than the dynamic product of encounters, changes, and reinterpretations.

And yet, from a semiotic perspective, the *myth of origins* is not dismissed as mere mystification. On the contrary, it is precisely through such narratives that tradition is constructed and made

¹²⁶ In *A Short History of Spaghetti with Tomato Sauce* (2019), Montanari develops a critique of the essentialisation of culinary traditions by examining a paradigmatic case: *spaghetti al pomodoro*. The history of this dish is rewritten by highlighting the mix of foreign influences that enabled it to become the most emblematic of all Italian foods.

intelligible. In this view, the origin does not function as a cause, but as a cultural effect—a retrospective point of anchorage that provides structure and meaning to the present form of a dish. The anecdote of Signora Saridda's *pasta alla Norma* is exemplary in this regard: it is not important whether it “really happened” in the way Correnti describes. What matters is the narrative's ability to generate cultural legitimacy, fix a name, and stabilise a canonical form through public acclamation.

From this perspective, semiotic analysis shifts the focus away from the truth-value of the anecdote and toward its discursive function. As argued elsewhere (Puca 2025), the *myth of origins* serves not as a historical explanation, but as a mode of *enunciative praxis*: a performative narrative that helps coordinate social meaning around a culinary form. It links the dish to a network of values—authenticity, excellence, locality—and legitimises a specific composition as the canonical one. The dish, in turn, becomes not solely a recipe, but a cultural object inscribed within a tradition.

What do we see in the specific case of the *pasta alla Norma* anecdote? A gathering of artists and intellectuals in a grand residence in the heart of Catania, the atmosphere of the *belle époque*, and the legendary Sicilian hedonism: the scene is defined by a thread linking artistic virtuosity, culinary excellence, and high society. The dining table becomes a stage offered up to the city itself—much like the great banquets of the medieval courts—through a network of connections between the domestic interior and the public sphere, populated by journalists and theatrical figures.

The *parterre* of the dining room acts as both audience and author of a narrative *glorification* which, just like in the theatre, simultaneously *qualifies* the work. It acts as both a positive *sanction* and a form of *qualification* that invites the repetition of the piece. From that foundational moment onwards, the beauty and excellence of this version of aubergine pasta are celebrated in their full Bellinian hyperbole: a dish that not only bears a name but carries a title. In doing so, it establishes a canon of eternal perfection. Just as the art of melodrama fixes an aesthetic canon for popular emotions—rendering them eternal through their theatrical staging—so too does the acclamation of this particular aubergine-based pasta consecrate a singular and unmatched execution.

The foundational anecdote thus becomes a decisive component of the *dish-as-text*, a key segment of its discursive body¹²⁷. It helps establish what qualifies as a “true” *Norma*, differentiating it from other, more generic aubergine pasta dishes. The anecdote also plays a central role in stabilising the expressive structure of the dish: not just *pasta with aubergines*, but *la Norma*, because it adheres to a codified narrative and aesthetic form. In this sense, the *myth of origins* operates both synchronically—by fixing a formal model—and diachronically, by positing a symbolic continuity between the original act and its subsequent reiterations.

Finally, the anecdote reflects the broader semiotic logic that governs food traditions: the interplay between individual performance and collective memory, between innovation and repetition. In Bloch's and Montanari's historiographical critique, the myth of origin is an obstacle to real historical understanding. But in a semiotic framework, it becomes a generative narrative device—one that

127 This intertextual view of the dish, moreover, aligns with the approach taken by Floch (1995) in his analysis of a creation by chef Michel Bras. In that context, the semiotician considers certain elements of ancient Greek culture – drawn from the work of D  tienne and Vernant (1974) – to be relevant to the textual framing of the dish, as they serve to add semiotic and narrative depth to the functioning of the ingredients within it.

constructs meaning, produces cultural order, and inscribes the ephemeral act of cooking into a longer, culturally intelligible lineage.

2. Canonical Operations: Making Norma

Pasta alla norma qualifies as a true culinary canon as demonstrated by a feature that is highly unusual—perhaps even unique—among Sicilian regional dishes: its preparation is strikingly uniform, relying on a closed set of ingredients and a clearly defined sequence of steps. This rigidity is reflected, as we shall see, both in the consistency of the recipe across various cookbooks and in the numerous implicit rules that the cook is expected to follow. The cook, in short, is positioned as an executor.



Fig. 1 - Pasta alla Norma. © Davide Puca.

With this in mind, let us consider a succinct, no-frills version of the recipe, drawn from Alba Allotta's contemporary cookbook *La cucina siciliana in 1000 ricette* (2003):

Pasta alla Norma

Serves 4:

- 400 g bucatini
- 1 aubergine
- 100 g salted ricotta
- 1.5 kg ripe tomatoes
- 2 cloves of garlic
- 1 bunch of fresh basil
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper

Wash the tomatoes and place them in a bowl of hot water for around ten minutes. Peel

them, remove the seeds, and chop coarsely. Transfer the tomatoes to a pan in which the garlic has been gently sautéed in a little oil. Add the basil leaves, a pinch of salt, and a sprinkle of pepper. Stir and let the sauce thicken over a moderate heat. Rinse the aubergine, cut it into small cubes, and leave it to rest in a colander sprinkled with salt for one hour; then fry it in hot oil. Boil the pasta in salted water, drain it while still *al dente*, and add it to the pan with the tomato sauce. Mix well, then add the aubergines, a handful of basil leaves, and flakes of salted ricotta (Allotta: 112, translation mine).

The preparation of *pasta alla Norma*, as clearly illustrated in this version, follows a highly schematic narrative structure, composed of transformation syntagms organised into distinct phases—a structure reminiscent of Greimas’s well-known semiotic analysis of the *soupe au pistou* recipe (Greimas 1983). The verbal transcription of gestures, broken down into orderly procedural paragraphs, mirrors a sequence of discrete actions, each dedicated to the preparation of a specific ingredient. These partial processes converge only at the very end, in a swift final assemblage. Much like in Greimas’s example, the recipe constructs a narrative where operations on substances are stabilised through convention, and the text privileges clarity, efficiency, and functional segmentation. This procedural model remains remarkably stable across all the cookbooks examined.

From a narrative perspective, the preparation of *pasta alla Norma* follows a series of clear and distinct steps (*sub-narrative programmes*) so common in Sicilian cooking that they can almost be seen as recurring *motifs*¹²⁸:

- the preparation of the sauce: tomatoes are blanched, peeled, deseeded and chopped, then cooked slowly with garlic and oil. The mixture is reduced and enriched with herbs;
- the frying of the aubergines: cubed, purged of bitterness, and fried in hot oil;
- the boiling of the pasta;
- the grating of salted ricotta;
- the cleaning of fresh basil leaves.

The familiarity and repetition of these five steps in Sicilian cuisine is reflected in the way they’re described in writing. The recipe doesn’t dwell on the initial condition of the ingredients, nor does it provide detailed guidance on the desired textures or outcomes. How long should you fry an aubergine? Which variety should you use? What kind of oil? Should the ricotta be shaved with a knife or grated?

Allotta’s cookbook is truly traditional in this sense: it’s written for *model readers* who already know how to cook, and don’t need everything explained in detail. This leads us to a second, related point: the ingredients that make up *pasta alla Norma* often appear in a semi-prepared state. In Sicilian food culture, these forms are so familiar and ritualised that they act like conventional forms—ready-made components that can be reused in many dishes. As a result, the steps that bring them to that semi-prepared state are often skipped or only briefly mentioned.

¹²⁸ A *motif* is a minimal unit at the discursive level that condenses a recurring micro-narrative into a figurative form. In these terms, it may be considered synonymous with *configuration*. For a more comprehensive definition, see Greimas and Courtés 1979, under the relevant entry.

This highlights a key idea in food semiotics: what we usually call “ingredients” are often just a snapshot—a frozen moment—in a longer process of transformation (see Bastide 1987). At some point, that process arrives at a culturally recognisable form (see Ingold 2013). But how do we know when the tomato sauce for *Norma* is ready? What thickness should it have? Even the vegetables we buy—how they look, how ripe they are—come to us already *formed* by culture and expectations (Grignaffini 2004). In this sense, they are not purely natural, but cultural hybrids (Latour 1991), pre-shaped for use in specific kinds of cooking, like making a sauce (Mangano 2014).

We confront this so-called “simplicity” whenever we attempt to cook a dish like *pasta alla Norma* or *carbonara*—only to realise just how difficult it is to get it right: simple things are often the hardest. Terms like “simple” and “elaborate”, or “natural” and “artificial” (see Marrone 2022: 67-72), should be understood not as fixed qualities, but as effects created by the way dishes are described and imagined within different food cultures. A dish like *Norma* seems simple not because it really is, but because many of its steps have been left out or taken for granted. Its complexity becomes visible only when someone unfamiliar with the tradition tries to follow the recipe—and runs into the full ambiguity of its apparent simplicity.

3. The layering of the ingredients

Both the limited range of ingredients and their specific combination in the final dish make *pasta alla Norma* a recipe characterised by a high degree of formal closure and strong visual impact. Let us now examine a few specific passages from cookbooks that describe the process of combining these ingredients.

To a typical plate of pasta with tomato sauce, add slices of fried aubergine, a generous sprinkling of salted ricotta, and a few basil leaves. (Dizionario delle cucine regionali italiane, Slow Food 2020: 478, translation mine)

Boil 400 g of spaghetti until al dente, then dress with part of the sauce. Pour the rest over the top, arrange the aubergine slices and basil leaves in a circle, and sprinkle generously with salted ricotta. (Tasca Lanza 1995: 35, translation mine)

Once everything is ready, cook the pasta, drain it while still al dente, and mix it in a serving bowl with the sauce and aubergines. Finish the dish by adding a generous spoonful of grated salted ricotta to each plate. (Pomar 1991: 105, translation mine)

Cook the pasta until al dente, drain it, and combine it with the tomato sauce. Plate the dish and add slices of aubergine, a generous dusting of grated salted ricotta, and a few more basil leaves. (Slow Food 2015: 70, translation mine)

Drain the pasta and place it in a serving bowl. Add 150 g of grated salted ricotta, the tomato sauce, and season with basil leaves and pepper. Mix well. Then plate the pasta individually, topping each portion with a few slices of aubergine, more grated ricotta, and a few basil leaves for decoration. (Coria 2019: 174, translation mine)

Cook the pasta, drain it, return it to the pot and sprinkle over two tablespoons of grated salted ricotta (cut into julienne-style shreds). Mix, then add a couple of ladles of very hot tomato sauce and stir again. Transfer the pasta to a preheated serving dish. Pour a few more

spoonfuls of sauce on top, and arrange whole slices of fried aubergine, as per tradition. Finish with more grated salted ricotta and, over everything, whole basil leaves (if small) or torn by hand. At the table, additional aubergine and ricotta will be available. (Ragusa 2016: 39, translation mine)

When we read the recipe extracts above in continuity with the previous paragraph, we observe a structural ambivalence at the heart of the dish:

Firstly, as noted earlier, the preparation of *pasta alla Norma* is based on a specific configuration of elements—what we have called narrative syntagms of figurative transformation. These are so culturally ingrained that they function as recurring *motifs* in Sicilian cuisine. Secondly, we observe that the final assembly of ingredients is characterised by a lack of blending. In this phase, *Norma* takes the form of a *collection* (Ventura Bordenca 2020: 201-202): a juxtaposition of complementary elements (pasta, sauce, aubergines, basil, salted ricotta) that together create a kind of paradigm of Sicilian gastronomy.

Indeed, the first extract—taken from the *Dizionario delle cucine regionali italiane* (Slow Food 2020) —encapsulates the entire preparation process by focusing solely on the final act of assembly, offering a kind of *mise en abyme* of the recipe through the arrangement of its most emblematic ingredients.

Despite minor differences between the sources, the defining feature of *Norma* is unquestionably the layered *plating* of its components:

- the pasta, where the only true blend occurs (between pasta and sauce), is concealed beneath later toppings;
- the fried aubergines;
- the shaved salted ricotta;
- the green basil leaves, which always complete the composition.

This results in a distinctly vertical layering of the dish, which defines its visual identity even before it is tasted. This approach to plating—uncommon in most Italian *primi piatti* (first courses) —is in fact closer to other Italian preparations with widespread international appeal, such as *melanzane alla parmigiana*, particularly popular in the Italian American food culture.

This unblended composition lends *pasta alla Norma* a formal structure defined by a principle of /non-continuity/ between its individual components. It is precisely this distinctive characteristic that sets *Norma* apart from all other common versions of *pasta with aubergines*.

4. The *attack*: from tasty to flavourful

The layered structure of the dish initiates a specific dynamic of interaction with the consumer—what Jacques Fontanille (2006) refers to as an *attack* (*attaque*)—a decisive moment marking the beginning of the eater’s engagement with the dish, both perceptually and affectively. This interaction, central to the semiotic functioning of the dish, plays a crucial role in shaping its overall meaning.

The first encounter is visual, yet immediately charged with emotion. It recalls the myth of origins set in Catania, where a crowd marvels at the splendour of the dish as it is brought into the dining room. This initial moment of perception becomes a catalyst for emotional response: on a collective level, it marks the *emotional awakening (constitution)* of the actantial subject. Thus, on an individual level, it triggers the *emotional disposition* towards eating¹²⁹. This passionate constitution of the subjects is vividly echoed in the origin myth itself, as the guests' enthusiastic acclamation of Signora Saridda's creation—"Chista è 'na vera Norma!" (i.e. "This is a real Norma!")—transforms a simple dish into an object of public admiration.

The clearly stratified *plating (montage)*, understood here as the meaningful organisation of the dish's visible elements, allows the consumer to savour *Norma* with their eyes even before engaging physically. The composition follows a deliberate *disposition (disposition)*, in Fontanille's sense—that is, the spatial and semantic arrangement of components designed to guide perception and produce an effect. It privileges an initial *tasty* moment, in Marrone's terms (2016)—that is, a mode of tasting grounded in recognition, cultural coding, and semantic legibility¹³⁰. In this *figurative* register of perception, each element (aubergine, ricotta, basil) is not just an ingredient, but a symbol: a condensed sign of Sicilian culinary identity.

This *tasty* phase is not yet about flavour as such, but about visual and symbolic clarity. The dish is "tasted" through sight, memory, and interpretive familiarity. In this respect, the composition acts like a visual narrative, reaching its apex in the *mise en abyme* found in the Slow Food dictionary's version of the recipe (2020), which condenses the entire process into the symbolic final arrangement of the key ingredients on the plate.

Despite minor variations among cookbooks, the defining trait of pasta alla Norma lies in its layered *assemblage (assemblage)*, as Fontanille would describe it: the pasta (with only the sauce integrated) forms the base, followed by fried aubergines, grated salted ricotta, and finally, fresh basil at the top. The vertical *layering* not only defines the dish's visual identity, but also establishes its semiotic structure before it is even tasted.

129 These terms are used in reference to Fontanille's canonical passion schema (Fontanille 2003).

130 In his analysis of taste and food semiotics, Gianfranco Marrone draws a distinction between two modes of gustatory experience: the *tasty* and the *flavourful* (Marrone 2016; 2019). These terms, consciously borrowed from everyday language, serve as semiotic equivalents to the visual categories of *figurative* and *plastic*, respectively, as originally developed by Greimas (1984). The *tasty* corresponds to a figurative register of perception—rooted in recognition, categorisation, and cultural coding. To say something is "tasty" implies that one is able to identify and name it, according to known semantic grids: one recognises the Merlot in the wine, the ginger in the soup. This mode of tasting is grounded in cultural competence and operates through cognitive frameworks. By contrast, the *flavourful* belongs to a more sensuous, plastic register: it is concerned not with the recognition of predefined meanings, but with the emergence of new, often ineffable sensory experiences. Here, perception does not follow knowledge; rather, it suspends it, allowing new forms of meaning to surface through contrasts in texture, temperature, aroma, and composition. Crucially, Marrone links this distinction to Greimas's notion of *aesthetic grasp* (1982), a moment in which the subject is transformed by sensoriality rather than discourse. In this light, the *flavourful* functions as a rupture—a sensory epiphany that escapes the bounds of language and classification. It does not oppose the *tasty*, but momentarily eludes it, revealing a deeper level of engagement with food that often resists verbalisation except through metaphor or specialist discourse, such as that of the gastronomic critic. Thus, just as an image can be read through both figurative and plastic dimensions—one referring to cultural representation, the other to formal sensory qualities—so too can a dish be experienced as both *tasty* and *flavourful*. The former engages the intellect and memory, the latter transforms the body and the self. This semiotic model enables a richer understanding of how food functions not only as nourishment or cultural symbol, but as a medium of sensory signification in its own right.

At the moment of eating, however, this carefully constructed visual order is disrupted: the fork becomes an agent of reconfiguration, introducing a new *syntax* of consumption. The eater moves vertically through the layers—joining aubergines with pasta, ricotta with tomato—creating a new unity through the act of combination.

It is at this stage that the *flavourful* dimension of the dish emerges. In Marrone's terms, this mode of tasting belongs to a *plastic* register of perception, no longer based on recognition, but on sensorial intensity, contrast, and the emergence of new meanings through experience. If the *tasty* involves naming, remembering, and categorising, the *flavourful* suspends such frameworks, allowing for a direct, affective engagement with texture, temperature, and composition. Here, taste is not pre-given but actively constructed by the eater through a dynamic interplay of elements.

This participatory, almost playful mode of eating more closely resembles the casual gesture of dipping french fries into ketchup than the uniformity of a fully amalgamated pasta dish. And it is precisely this formal discontinuity—this refusal to homogenise—that sets *pasta alla Norma* apart from other aubergine-based recipes and gives it its unique structure and expressive richness.

5. Norma and Its Others: Norms and Culinary Anomie

At this point, a seemingly obvious but far from trivial question arises: what exactly is the difference between *pasta with aubergines* and *pasta alla Norma*? And how can we account for the redundancy of these recipes in cookbooks?

A first interpretative clue, predictably, lies in the cookbooks themselves, where different versions of *pasta with aubergines* often appear – typically placed alongside *pasta alla Norma*. Here are just two examples:

Pasta ca Mulinciàna (Pasta with Aubergine)

This is a basic pasta dish dressed with fresh tomato sauce and finished with slices of fried aubergine, generally cut into rounds. It's worth noting that the term *pasta che scravàgghi* is still used to refer to pasta with fried aubergine—this time cut into small cubes, which, once served on the plate, are said to resemble cockroaches (though the origin of this unflattering comparison is unknown). (Coria 2019, pp. 182 – 183, translation mine)

Pasta with Sauce and Aubergines

Pasta with tomato and aubergines is one of the most common dishes in Sicily. However, the Palermo version differs from that of Catania. It uses tomato purée and parmesan, and the aubergines are cut into slices rather than cubes.

Ingredients: 600 g rigatoni, 1.2 kg ripe tomatoes, 4 large onions, 1 bunch of basil, 4 aubergines, 50 g parmesan, oil, salt, pepper.

Preparation: Slice the aubergines into 0.5 cm rounds and leave them in salted water for about an hour. Drain, dry, and fry them in abundant oil. Meanwhile, prepare a Palermo-style tomato sauce with tomatoes, onions, and basil. Boil the rigatoni and dress them in a large bowl with the sauce, basil, a few slices of aubergine and a touch of the frying oil. Place the remaining aubergine slices on top, add more sauce, sprinkle with grated parmesan, and garnish with basil leaves. (Pomar 1991: 105-106, translation mine)

Given how often *pasta alla Norma* is described in celebratory terms, it's striking to see how modestly its less fortunate cousin is treated in these texts. In both cases, *pasta with aubergines* is described with no more than the adjective "common". This low status borders on disgust in one cookbook, which refers to the dialect metaphor *scarafaggi* ("cockroaches"), evoked by the appearance of diced aubergine—and implicitly condemns the unknown inventors of such a grotesque label. Here we are at the popular antipodes of *Norma*, where the former is anchored in myth and symbolic elevation, and the latter sinks into anomie and genericity.

This semantic vagueness is mirrored in the method of preparation. While *Norma* is codified to the point that some authors link it to the literal meaning of the word *norm*, *pasta with aubergines* appears to follow no fixed script. Within Sicilian cookbooks, we observe the discretion afforded to the cook in key areas: the shape of the aubergine (noted simply as "generally sliced into rounds"—a description of common practice rather than a prescriptive rule), the use of onion instead of garlic, the choice of cheese, and above all, the style of *disposition* of the ingredients, which replaces the structured layering of *Norma* with a vaguer, looser composition. Broadening the view to include online sources, *pasta with aubergines* becomes even less typified: it is often presented without any specific regional attribution and allows for considerable freedom in both ingredients and technique.

More broadly, the relationship between *pasta alla Norma* and more generic forms of *pasta with aubergines* may be understood—following a familiar logic in food culture—as a *participatory relationship* (Hjelmslev 1933), in which a more precise and codified term both belongs to and distinguishes itself from the broader category it inhabits. Within the discourse of culinary typicality, this relationship is subject to localisation by culinary texts, and its contours shift according to regional perspectives. Some Sicilian cookbooks map this distinction onto the perennial rivalry between Catania and Palermo, at times subtly or overtly asserting the superiority of *Norma*—thus reinforcing a more exclusive, binary opposition. In other cases, *Norma* comes to symbolise Sicilian cuisine as a whole.

What emerges is a semiotic tension between normativity and anomie, between a dish that functions as a canonical model—anchored in a founding myth, structured through codified composition, and marked by symbolic recognition—and a looser, more indeterminate variant whose identity is defined by absence: of rules, of origin stories, of formal constraints. While *pasta alla Norma* exemplifies the logic of the *norm* in both the culinary and the semiotic sense—serving as a standard of reference and repetition—*pasta with aubergines* occupies a nebulous space, lacking fixed features, open to improvisation, and typically presented without regional anchoring or symbolic depth.

This contrast reveals not simply two recipes, but two semiotic regimes: one based on stabilisation, sanction, and iteration; the other on flexibility, anonymity, and dispersal. *Norma* is not just a pasta dish—it is a name, a title, a compositional and cultural structure. *Pasta with aubergines*, by contrast, appears as the silent background against which *Norma* asserts its authority, a field of potentiality that only gains shape through contrast with the canonical form.

6. Perfection as a Cultural Code: The Normativity of Norma

Italian offers a fortunate ambiguity between *Norma*, as the name of an opera, and *norma*, as a rule—a double meaning that enriches the dish with both artistic resonance and normative authority,

making it not only enjoyable to eat but also intellectually stimulating: *in short, good to eat and good to think about*. This double meaning has contributed significantly to the dish's fame and symbolic richness.

Just as a linguistic norm provides a preferential path for the speaker—relieving them of the burden of choice—*pasta alla Norma* narrows (or even disqualifies) the range of alternative ways in which a cook might prepare aubergine pasta. It asserts itself as the canonical version of the dish, an intensive term that, as we have seen, both belongs to the broader category of aubergine-based pasta dishes and simultaneously sets itself apart from them.

In semiotic terms, *norms* and *usages* are positioned between *langue* (understood as system or schema) and *parole* (understood as situated enunciation) (Hjelmslev 1942; Bertrand 2000; Paolucci 2020). As has already been noted, the culinary domain also preserves and circulates its rules, traditions, and prior enunciations through cultural texts—such as recipes and dishes—via *enunciative practices* (Puca 2021; Puca 2025; Marrone 2022). Our analysis of *pasta alla Norma* has revealed that recipes are not merely spaces where norms and uses coexist, but also active sites in which their relationship is regulated and produced. As *programmatic texts*, recipes tend to guide the actions of their readers with varying degrees of prescriptiveness (Marrone 2014).

This prescriptive function becomes particularly visible in the contrast between *pasta with aubergines* and *pasta alla Norma*. The recipes for the latter are characterised by regularity and normativity: their discursive strategy aims above all to reaffirm the existence of a culinary canon. *Pasta alla Norma* seeks to restrict the cook's freedom on two fronts. First, it discourages personal variations or improvisations (*situated enunciation*). Second, it resists hybridisation with broader culinary habits (*social usages*)—such as replacing garlic with onion, stirring the aubergines into the pasta, or substituting parmesan for salted ricotta.

Pasta with aubergines, by contrast, leaves its reader considerable freedom. It becomes a culinary space that embraces not only individual interpretation, but also a wide variety of social usages—often of regional origin, though not necessarily institutionalised (e.g., sautéed rather than fried aubergines, garlic or onion, herbs other than basil, and so on). If much of the research on recipe writing has focused on the semiotic structure of the *programmatic text*, our analysis reconnects that structure with its normative function—specifically in relation to culinary codes. In this regard, the *myth of origins* plays a legitimising role: it supports and reinforces the prescriptive authority of the recipe and encourages its cultural diffusion.

As Lorusso (2015) observes, norms are also “complex social facts” and, as instruments of value judgement, they are spaces of *axiologisation*—that is, of shared systems for appreciating and devaluing things. The positive cycle of appreciation surrounding *pasta alla Norma* is built and reinforced through the multiplication of *terminal aesthetic judgements* (Marsciano 2000), which accompany each reappearance of the dish. From this point of view, we began with the *myth of origins* precisely to show how the anecdote itself should not be read as a reliable historical account, but as an emblematic case of how the *value* of the dish—its perceived *perfection*—is constructed.

This is clearly reflected in the kinds of judgments the dish regularly elicits—judgments that are not simply about taste or preference, but which claim an almost absolute excellence:

A true masterpiece of culinary flavour. (Pomar 1991: 105, translation mine)

A perfectly balanced dish, simple and flawless from every point of view: gastronomic, nutritional, and aesthetic. (Ragusa 2016: 38, translation mine)

But when the various ingredients—the tomatoes, the aubergines, the oil, the basil, and the salted ricotta—are at their best, their respective flavours combine into one of the world’s truly sublime pasta dishes.” (Simeti 2009: 40)

I, too, was completely blown away that a pasta could taste so good. It was one of the most vibrant dishes I ever had in my life, and I still remember the flavours. (Locatelli 2011: 186)

This discursive isotopy of *perfection*, which runs through nearly all representations of *Norma*, is set in contrast with the *imperfection* inherent in more “common” and non-canonical versions of aubergine pasta. In the case of *Norma*, perfection responds to a strongly classical canon: not only in terms of the way the ingredients are layered rather than blended, but more importantly in the structural relationship between the dish as a whole and its individual components, governed by principles of balance and completeness, as well as fidelity to an ideal model. The immutability of the dish contributes to the construction of its semiotic value as *perfection*, in the *terminative* sense of the word: having reached its ultimate form, *Norma* is always re-enacted according to the same well-established script.

It is striking how this logic—governing the ideal relation between the totality of the dish and its discrete parts—emerges at the intersection of at least three distinct semiotic levels.

On the figurative level, the clear separation and visibility of each ingredient produces a strong iconising effect. Visually and gustatorily, each element stands out and is immediately recognisable. There can be no *Norma* without the marked protagonism of every one of its components. In this sense, the dish is pure spectacle, reaffirmed by the harmonious interplay of *flavourful* sensations that emerges during tasting.

At a more thematic level, the prominence of the key ingredients—each a topos in Sicilian culinary mythology—is reinforced by the broader cultural narratives surrounding them. Tomatoes, pasta, ricotta, and aubergines all feature in dedicated cookbook chapters, which highlight the richness of Sicily’s paradigmatic diversity and help to structure the syntagmatic organisation of recipes (cf. Anna Pomar’s notes on aubergines, cited above). In this framework, each ingredient functions as an isotopic connector, linking the dish to the wider *gastrosphere* and supporting its regional identity.

This specific way of *textualising perfection* through food invites us to rethink the very meaning of the word. In the case of *Norma*, perfection has less to do with truth (cf. Goodman and Elgin 1988) or ethical correctness, and more with *rightness*—what Bertrand (2006) calls *justesse* of enunciation. If *pasta with aubergines* is characterised by the absence of a singular, proper form—leaving countless interpretive choices hidden behind the curtain of the text—*pasta alla Norma* asserts its perfection by holding everything together, spectacularly, on stage.

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