



Food and Foodways

Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gfof20>

Cooking and feminism through Argentine literature

Vanesa Miseres

To cite this article: Vanesa Miseres (2022) Cooking and feminism through Argentine literature, *Food and Foodways*, 30:3, 208-227, DOI: [10.1080/07409710.2022.2089827](https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2022.2089827)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2022.2089827>



Published online: 24 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 186



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Cooking and feminism through Argentine literature

Vanesa Miseres

Department of Romance Languages & Literatures, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes women’s connections with cooking through the work of three female writers from Argentina. I uncover key moments in the history of the country in which culinary practices represent a channel for larger reflections on gender struggles and women’s rights. I distinguish three representative cases within the complex and rich relationship between women, cooking, and feminism in Argentine literature: the incursion of nineteenth-century writers in recipe books; the feminists of the 1980s and their use of the culinary language as a political and erotic expression; and cooking and food as an exploration of new social and sexual orders in contemporary literature. Within each period, I focus on a particular writer and literary work: Juana Manuela Gorriti’s *Cocina ecléctica* (1890), Tununa Mercado’s short story “Antieros” (1988), and Gabriela Cabezón Cámara’s *Las aventuras de la China Iron* (2017). These Argentine authors provide their knowledge on the diverse cultural roots and habits in South American cooking and give predominance to senses and desire over rational prescriptions on women’s bodies, among other narrative strategies. Thus, analyzed as a corpus, these authors give us a broader idea of feminist practices through cooking and, ultimately, expand multiple meanings of feminism itself from a local perspective.

KEYWORDS

Cooking; feminism; Argentina; women writers; feminist food studies; cookbooks

Introduction

In an article published in 1908 entitled “La cocina” (The Kitchen), the feminist activist María Abella (1863–1926), declared:

Among the various slaveries that we women have to endure, this is undoubtedly one of the heaviest; we always have to be busy or thinking about food.

The stomach is the boiler of human machinery, and women, whether we have an inclination for it or not, have to be the eternal machinists who fuel the machine.

The kitchen! How can we escape the worry of the kitchen? (my translation, Abella 1965, 95)

Abella's feminist agenda was most visible through her work as a contributor to and editor of her journal *We Women* (*Nosotras*, 1902-1904) and *The New Woman* (*La Nueva Mujer* 1910-1912), the journal of the National Feminist League. Abella founded the National League of Women Freethinkers in the Argentine city of La Plata and she utilized a four-point plan to affirm her objectives on women's civil and political rights, divorce, and the protection of children. The League also made clear its support for women's suffrage. In her feminist convictions of the above-mentioned article, María Abella established a direct connection between the confinement of women to the kitchen with other oppressions such as the denial of the right to vote, since both conditions were linked to the belief of their intellectual and civil inferiority. Thus, she concludes that: "there is no doubt that progress will finally free ourselves from the slavery of the kitchen, but in the meantime, let us examine how to make it lighter" (Abella 1965, 95). Interestingly, at the same time that Abella saw the kitchen as a form of oppression, she also believed that it would be women themselves who should, collectively, resignify and alleviate the burden of domestic labor as a necessary step toward political emancipation. Like many other Latin American feminist women of her time, Abella did not question traditional gender roles but rather believed, among other issues, motherhood to be fundamentally empowering rather than disabling (Rappaport 2001, 4). She considered that new ways of women's work in the kitchen could bring about gender equality and social change.

Maria Abella's powerful text combines in a same argument the contradictions of the relationship between cooking and feminism. For centuries, the spaces and the meanings of cooking and the kitchen were in Western societies as the only ones suitable for women, acting almost as a prison. Inside the home, the kitchen represented insurmountable walls for generations of women who, with the awakening of feminism and its political demands, denounced cooking to protest against the gendered division of private and public spheres that left women few opportunities beyond the role of housewife. But concurrently, for centuries women have found in cooking and the kitchen a form of expression of their power and creativity. Or, as the internationally acclaimed British cookbook author Nigella Lawson stated in her 2018 essay, they have expressed that "home cooking can be a feminist act" full of esthetic pleasure and social and political meanings.¹

The revalorization of cooking as an empowering activity for women has been the focus of the field of feminist food studies, which has contributed to complex considerations of food, cooking, and the kitchen as more than a marker of patriarchal oppression. The devaluation of women's labor in the kitchen argued by feminist intellectuals such as Silvia Federici (2004) has likewise been approached by scholars in multiple disciplines

as a hidden source from which to read women's histories and expressions (Shapiro 1986; Leonardi 1989; Bower 1997; Counihan and Kaplan 1998; Avakian and Haber 2005; Bilbija 1996; André 2002; Abarca 2006; Pite 2013; Mc Lean 2013).² Inspired by feminist voices such as Maria Abella's and scholarly and literary works that have added a feminist perspective to the study of food, this essay analyzes women's connections with cooking through the work of three writers from Argentina. I uncover key moments in the history of the country in which culinary practices represent a channel for larger reflections on gender struggles and women's rights. I distinguish three representative phases within the complex and rich relationship between women, cooking, and feminism in Argentine literature: the incursion of nineteenth-century writers in recipe books; the feminisms of the 1980s and their use of the culinary language as a political and erotic expression; and cooking and food as an exploration of new social and sexual orders in contemporary literature. For each period, I focus on a particular writer and literary work: Juana Manuela Gorriti's *Cocina ecléctica* (1890), Tununa Mercado's short story "Antieros" (1988), and Gabriela Cabezón Cámara's *Las aventuras de la China Iron* (2017).

While Juana Manuela Gorriti's and Tununa Mercado's texts have already been analyzed by other scholars for their use of food as a vehicle to discuss gender issues,³ my goal of studying them together and chronologically contributes to a clear understanding of the development of cooking in Argentine literature as a proto-feminist or feminist act existing from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. I show that reflections on food and cooking have historically served as a discursive and cultural space from which to manifest political views on women's education and sexuality. Last, although the authors included in this essay express themselves from a position of privilege as renowned professional writers of their time, I show that food and cooking allow them to value non-dominant cultural practices. They share their knowledge on the diverse cultural roots and habits in South American cooking and give predominance to the senses and desire over rational prescriptions on women's bodies, among other narrative strategies. Thus, these Argentine authors, analyzed as a corpus, provide us with a broader idea of feminist practices through cooking and, ultimately, expand multiple meanings of feminism itself from a local perspective.

Argentina has been the center of several Latin American feminist debates (abortion, obstetric violence, "feminist strikes") in the past decade, especially after the emergence of Ni Una Menos (Not One Less) in 2015, a feminist movement that has spread across the world. Its campaigns against femicides led the group to expand their claims against other forms of gender-based violence, many of them connected to women's domestic work. The movement has been key, at the same time, in resignifying such

work as a means of empowerment, forging collective alliances, and responding to capitalist and patriarchal social structures. Through literary representations of cooking, Argentine women writers have been able to reflect on the complexities of feminism in the country. They have also added diversity to the expressions and discourses that constitute the history of a feminist Argentine literature.

Cookbooks and women's empowerment in the nineteenth century

The publication of *Cocina Ecléctica* (*Eclectic Cuisine*, 1890) by the Argentine writer exiled in Peru, Juana Manuela Gorriti (1816-1892), constitutes an essential reference when analyzing the connection of women writers with culinary discourses and practices in Latin America. Best known for her fantastic and historical fiction as well as her memoirs, Juana Manuela Gorriti spent her life traveling Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru and writing about these places and their shared history as newly-formed Latin American nations. Gorriti belonged to an illustrious family of landowners, military officers, and clerics. Exiled for political reasons from Argentina in 1831, the author married Manuel Isidoro Belzú (later the president of Bolivia) in 1833, but she eventually left him to live in Peru with their two daughters. In Lima, she ran a girls' school, hosted literary salons (*tertulias*), and in 1845 published her first novel, *La quena* (*The Flute*), set in colonial Peru and depicting conflicts among white, black, and indigenous peoples. An active member of what Francesca Denegri (1996) defined as “the first generation of women intellectuals” in Peru, she also had a prolific career as a journalist, founding periodicals and writing chronicles in the South American press until her death in Buenos Aires in 1892.

Cocina Ecléctica reflects Gorriti's interest in connecting the multiple regions of South America together through writing. This recipe book replicates the dynamics of her literary salons, for the author brings together a large number of female intellectuals and socialites from Argentina, Peru, and Bolivia, as well as from other countries, who each contributed a recipe to create a Spanish-American and feminine culinary map. The volume is divided by type of dishes, including some general categories like soups, fish, or poultry, but also adding specific sections for South American foods with indigenous and *criollo* origins such as tamales, empanadas or asados.⁴ The selection presents nationalistic and patriotic elements from the women's perspectives. For example, there are recipes such as “Dorado a la San Martín,” a fish in honor of the liberator of South America, José de San Martín (Gorriti 1890, 15), combined with a cosmopolitan taste that can be seen in other dishes such as “hen à la Persian,” a recipe brought from a World Fair by the collaborator's father (Gorriti 1890, 55). We also find local adaptations using popular ingredients in Europe and the United

States such as oysters, the influence of African-origin servants on the “*sollito mojarra*” (another fish recipe whose authorship is attributed to a black woman, “the negrita Encarnación”), and indigenous techniques and recipes that include Quechua names such as *chicha*, *humintas*, and *guatia* (Gorriti 1890, 18, 155, 26).⁵

Reading *Cocina ecléctica* from the perspective of current feminist food studies, we value the role of cookbooks in both shaping and defying gender roles within a given period. Recently, both Melissa Goldthwaite (2017) and Kennan Ferguson (2020) have expanded the argument made by Laura Shapiro (1986) on women and cookbooks and have stressed the importance of studying them. Their analyses explain that cookbooks are more than a place to record recipes, acting also as sites to discuss political issues and learn lessons for social change (Goldthwaite 2017, 5). Cookbooks, read through a feminist lens, show that taste, production, and domesticity, among other aspects of daily life, embody political acts. This is particularly relevant for the Latin American context where, as Meredith Abarca (2006, 10) has expressed, culinary practices, for a large sector of women without access to other forms of knowledge production, represent one of the few spaces in which to affirm their own identity. In Argentina, Paula Caldo, Karina Perticone, and Marcela Fugardo have undertaken the task of editing nineteenth-century women’s cookbooks and have positioned women’s food writing as a fundamental piece in the construction of a history of women, as well as their knowledge and practices.⁶

From the selection of recipes, one can conclude that in *Cocina ecléctica* women present themselves as the owners of a valuable and diverse culinary, cultural, historical, and linguistic knowledge that is implied in each contribution. At a time when Latin American nations were trying to define their identities as independent from the European metropolis but, simultaneously, as modern and cosmopolitan, the plurality of *Cocina ecléctica* configures an important example of women’s influences on the creation of national cuisines and their elements. It shows that women were eager to participate in national matters, not only by explicitly claiming more access to the public sphere, but also from daily life activities such as the exchange of recipes within the kitchens, markets, and salons they frequented. These activities led by women’s socialization and labor—as the contributors of Gorriti’s cookbook seem to express—are central to the creation of a sense of belonging, an idea of a common yet plural history, and ultimately, a group of citizens that would establish national norms and institutions.

Women, however, were not born with the skills and knowledge implied in *Cocina ecléctica* but acquired them within their given culture from other women and through a series of normative texts that proliferated in the nineteenth century. Etiquette books and educational programs on home

economics and domestic science were key in promoting culinary knowledge to women as central to their good performance in the home. Additionally, imitating countries like the United States or France, Argentine schools included classes on these subjects. Cooking lessons, house management, and domestic chores were part of the school curricula for girls in Argentina (Rodríguez 2021, 617). Girls received less hours of language, mathematics, and science than boys in order to make space for what was considered the main focus of their education: the fulfillment of the needs of their future husbands and children.⁷

Women's literary journals and educational publications also included articles on women's domestic instruction, in which cooking held a prominent role. Amelia Palma (pseudonym of the Argentine writer Ana Pintos), for example, published "*Párrafos sobre economía doméstica*" (Segments on Domestic Economy) as a feminine section for the *Revista de Educación* (Journal of Education) from Buenos Aires between 1883 and 1884 and included advice on food and drinks preparation.⁸ Another Argentine writer contemporary to Gorriti, Lola Larrosa, published "*El Hogar*" (The Home), an article in which she describes the home as a sanctuary—the same word used by Gorriti in *Cocina ecléctica's* prologue (Gorriti 1890, 2)—where virtuous women reign as "angels of peace" (my translation; Larrosa 1877, 129). The Latin American etiquette book and best seller by Venezuelan Manuel Carreño, *Manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras* (*Manual of Urbanity and Good Manners*, 1853), had several Argentine editions.⁹ Carreño's book—as Beatriz González Stephan has shown (1999)—is a significant example in understanding the ideals of citizenship that were imposed in the newly formed Latin American nations at the time. In it, Carreño clearly states that although both men and women should follow strict models of moral and behaviors, it was women who should attain these norms more rigorously, since they were in charge of the family (Carreño 1875, 38, 58). On food and table manners specifically, Argentine educated women were also familiar with Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *The Physiology of Taste* (1825), as Manuela Martínez proves in her recipe for *Cocina ecléctica*, "*Relleno a la Manolita*" (Manolita's Stuffing). Manuela affirms that the quality of her recipe has been proven by her brother, who has a sophisticated palate "á la Brillat-Savarin" and that therefore the dish deserves to be included in Gorriti's cookbook as well (Gorriti 1890, 82).

In her cookbook, Gorriti adheres to the nineteenth-century domestic narratives that imposed an image of the ideal women as a housewife, pure and devoted to her husband and family, but she does so subversively. Just as María Abella articulated in "The Kitchen," in *Cocina ecléctica*, cooking is presented as both a reaffirmation of the nineteenth-century domestic

ideal of women as well as women's ability to transform such. While women are sharing recipes, procedures, and family traditions that build their lives as domestic subjects, they simultaneously are making this information public and relevant beyond their own private spheres through the act of writing and publishing it as a book. *Cocina ecléctica*, in other words, is inspired by, but it is not a manual of domestic economy. Cooking functions more as a suitable metaphor or a discursive pretext for women to get together and become visible, rather than a set of rules to be followed by them and their female audience. In fact, if we wish to prepare these dishes, we will find out that several recipes are inaccurate in quantities or execution steps. Additionally, in the prologue, Gorriti confesses to having ignored the popular advice of retaining a husband through his stomach (Gorriti 1890, 2). Instead of learning how to cook, she says that she spent most of her time devoted to reading. *Cocina ecléctica's* initial intention was, therefore, to compensate for her lack of domestic skills. However, Gorriti does not contribute any recipe of her own. More than in cooking itself, again, Gorriti is focused in creating a feminine validated space in which women can strengthen their networks and exchanges, and the importance they have had historically.

For this reason, *Cocina ecléctica* can be claimed as an example of a proto-feminist project. Decades before the creation of the first feminist groups in the country,¹⁰ Gorriti conceives culinary practices, in cooking and writing about them in *Cocina ecléctica*, as a collective and public endeavor for the empowerment of women. Its recipes constitute a language through which to understand—as previously mentioned—the history of the women who created or prepared them. Thus, through the recipes we approach women's desires and intentions, and in doing so we recognize that cooking is a practice crossed by gender politics (Shapiro 1986). Luisa G. de Murature is another contributor from Buenos Aires who exemplifies this purpose. She engagingly narrates the historical roots of *The General's Bullets*, a recipe consisting of boiled eggs filled with meat and peanuts and later breaded and fried. The eggs were first prepared by three young women to feed General José de San Martín, who had arrived at their *estancia* (ranch) in a desperate search for bullets during the civil wars that followed independence. Murature's story establishes a parallel between the battlefield and the kitchen: the eggs resemble the shape of ammunition and the success of the recipe mirrors the military triumphs of San Martín (Gorriti 1890, 87–88). This recipe aligns with Gorriti's purpose of challenging the idea of a sole place and work for a woman. It demonstrates women's engagement with national history and also unravels the commonly hidden participation of previous generations of women in the nation's wars of independence.

Contesting patriarchy through the culinary language

In the first part of the twentieth century, women's bodies were regulated by even more strict premises than in the century before. The popularity of hygienist theories among Argentine culture, politics, and sciences made women's bodies the main focus of their policies for social control. Women continued to be perceived as the guardians of a family's health and morality, and thus their behavior was regulated by rigorous instructions on how to keep a house clean and a family properly fed. The first women feminists in the country, Elvira Rawson and Cecilia Grierson, both of whom were doctors, insisted on the education of women in health issues related to the home and infant care. For decades, women's bodies could not be associated with pleasure and sex. When they were, it was in association with prostitution, another prominent concern in early twentieth-century Argentina. A widespread fear of venereal diseases and other infections existed with the gradual growth of immigrants arriving to the country and the alarmingly high rate of infant deaths. This charged women with the practical and moral responsibility of educating themselves through health and state programs in how to be good mothers, cooks, and nurses for the wellbeing of their families. Again, schools were the privileged channel to transmit these instructions, and hygienist practices have remained rooted in Argentine culture until the present.¹¹

Some feminist writers in the second half of the twentieth century contested these patriarchal structures around the home and women's roles in it and used cooking as a discursive vehicle to express a more direct self-evaluation and criticism than Gorriti, in a context of social changes and demands that accompanied each author's individual voice. Moreover, in the 1960s and 1970s, Argentina was no stranger to the impact of second-wave feminism, but in a quite different context, as popular struggles had to confront profoundly repressive de facto governments. Women's groups questioned the close link between militarism and masculine domination and their voices emerged to denounce torture, "disappearances," and other human rights violations (Bastian Duarte 2012, 155-156). After dictatorship, with the return to democracy in 1983 and as a response to the masculine and authoritarian military notions of family and society, feminists focused on political and legal equality for women, control over one's body, sexual choice and reproductive rights.

Tununa Mercado (1939-) echoed these new explorations on women's bodies and sexuality through cooking as a metaphor for pleasure in "Antieros," a short story in her collection of erotic narratives, *Canon de alcoba*. Mercado's career and writing style are influenced by her experience of the two Argentine military dictatorships that drove her and her family

into exile. She lived in France from 1966 to 1970 during the military takeover led by General Onganía and then spent her second exile in Mexico from 1974 to 1986, escaping the military dictatorship that occurred between 1976 and 1983 in Argentina. Mercado returned to Argentina several years after democracy had been reinstated (Levine 2009, 111). Her work reflects on the importance of memory and trauma as responses to state violence and is marked by the expansion of feminism in theory and practice in the 1980s, which in Latin America was manifested in the large number of feminist publications and meetings throughout the region. In *Canon de alcoba* Mercado defies the patriarchal limits of a society that was facing the consequences of repression and censorship of a recently-ended dictatorship. Her short stories celebrate the plural forms of desire, and sexuality is understood beyond sexual binarisms and fixed gender identities.

In “Antieros” this occurs in the realm of the kitchen. Mercado brings the “appetites of the body” (Bird 1998, 95), that is women’s sexual and culinary desires, to the center of her narrative. She then liberates herself and her readers from prescriptive discourses and strict rules on how to cook, eat, and behave in general. According to Rita Segato, a major figure of Latin American decolonial feminism, patriarchy is a political structure based on the inequality between genders and the appropriation of the female body. Under this perspective, Mercado’s short story can be read as a response to the violent and marginalizing practices toward women that marked her historical context, since it insists on the celebration and ownership of emotions and the body through sensual culinary discoveries (Segato 2003).

“Antieros” adopts the prescriptive language of a handbook of home economics or a cookbook. But, instead of giving precise instructions to create a dish or perform a house chore, the text guides women through an exploration of their own bodies and the detection of their erotic zones. The story begins with a series of infinitive verbs that in Spanish act as impersonal and imperative words that explain the sequential procedure for successfully accomplishing household chores: “begin with the bedrooms,” “sweep,” “collect the trash.” As in a manual or a cookbook, this passage consists of small internal units that are sequentially related (Bower 1997, 53). After finishing the housework instructions, the narrator heads to the kitchen and there encounters a number of phallus-shaped vegetables that “[awaken] the senses of the fastidious cleaner who suddenly feels the urge to indulge herself” (André 2001, 138). The enumeration of carrots and cucumbers, among other vegetables, provides a sense of excess of erotic language that contrasts with the formulaic beginning of the story.

Mercado presents cooking and the kitchen as experiences anchored in gender and sexuality, confirms the metaphorical connection between food and sex (Counihan 1999, 9), and revalues and reinvents the kitchen as a

powerful symbol of female writing (Calf 71).¹² The narrator of “Antieros” is neither a selfless housewife focused on cooking for others nor a servant, and she rejects other forms of domestic labor. She is a woman who has found a source of self-pleasure in the kitchen, and who shows that food manipulation can also be empowering. This woman goes into the kitchen to follow a recipe through her senses in feeling the shapes and smelling the aroma of onion, marinated meat, and boiling rice:

No one can interrupt this session until nearly four o'clock in the afternoon. Nonetheless, bolt the door; gently slip off the blouse and, then, the skirt. Stand wearing only the apron, while tasting, with different ladles, over and over, the flavors, adjusting them, giving them more body, condensing each particular identity. (Mercado 2002, 27)

While the success of a recipe is usually measured by the enjoyment or comfort it can bring to others, in this text, it is defined by the autoerotic pleasure it can produce to the woman following its instructions (Jara 1996, 419). Later in the story, Mercado includes a new enumeration of instructions that combines the language of a meal preparation with direction on how a woman should touch her own body to provoke pleasure:

Again, unbutton the blouse and give the breasts air and, without further preamble, as if rubbing endive with essence or working liniment into the underlip of a young bull, cover the erect nipples with a few drops of oil, circle the tip of the index finger around the aureole and lightly massage each of the breasts, without differentiating between the two domains. (Mercado 2002, 26)

The author makes use of the culinary knowledge that was assumed to be a woman's domain (“as if rubbing endive with essence”) and takes it into the less explored terrain of women's sexuality.

The language of Tununa Mercado takes the kitchen and the female body out of the previous decades' hygienist and oppressive regulations. She offers new meanings to both the female body and the kitchen and transforms them into erotic zones that could reach orgasm without guilt or social censure. The story concludes, hence, with the following advice:

Smear the body still more meticulously, clefts of varying depths and character, depressions and projections; gyrate, bend, seek harmony of movement, inhale the olive and cumin, the caraway and curry, the mixtures that the skin has come to absorb, upsetting the senses and transforming into a dance the increasingly cadent paces, and finally “submit to culmination amidst the myriad secretions and fragrances” (Mercado 2002, 27).

If the nineteenth-century books of etiquette ruled women's public behavior at the table, early twentieth-century hygienist policies and later dictatorial governments advised against any female conduct that prevented them from being good mothers and wives, Mercado provides instructions

for the opposite of both. “Antieros” is a mandate to explore desire within the space of the home and to transform the domestic sphere into an intimate space for erotism. In addition, the self-pleasure strategies that the woman manifests allow her to fulfill her erotic desire in solitude, without any other male nor female body, in such a way that the short story breaks with traditional constraints for women’s sexuality. Pleasure is conceived beyond the structure of a marriage or heterosexual couple and experienced, instead, through one’s own body and (culinary) senses.

Queer cooking

Contemporary feminist writers have continued deepening reflections on gender norms and violence against women through cooking and food references in their works. As mentioned in the introduction, the last decades of Argentine feminist movements have been marked by the rise of Ni Una Menos and its understanding of femicides as a symptom of a society that have culturally constructed feminized bodies as things that can be used for male pleasure, disciplined and discarded. The movement seeks to revert this perception by bringing all forms of violence against women to the public sphere as part of the country’s political and human rights’ debates. Additionally, it proposes a non-normative understanding of gender and fosters alliances among women, lesbians and bisexuals, *travestis*, trans and feminized bodies (Ni Una Menos 2018, 28, 3).

In her latest novel *The Adventures of China Iron* (2017), Argentine writer and founding member of the feminist movement Ni Una Menos, Gabriela Cabezón Cámara (1968—) adheres to the collective’s principles and presents non-binary sexualities through the transformative encounters of bodies with new foodstuffs. The text offers feminist food studies an interesting example of a revision of heteronormative readings on gender and food. When reflecting on gender, feminism and food, scholarly works have usually adopted a heteronormative analytic framework, understanding gender relations between men and women as an “elemental form of human association ... [and] the very model of intergender relations” (Warner 1993, xxi; Ehrhardt 2006, 92). Cabezón Cámara’s queering of conventional notions of gender and sexuality aligns instead with more diverse gender experiences in Argentina. Food and recipes additionally provide Cabezón Cámara with a language that articulates desire and sexuality in terms of food preparation, as well as sharing and adapting traditional culinary techniques and practices.

Cabezón Cámara is one of the most prominent figures in Argentine and Latin American literature, who is also recognized as an eminent feminist intellectual in the region. Her debut novel, *Slum Virgin* (2009) as well as her novella *You’ve Seen God’s Face* (2011) explores women’s

sexuality in connection to violence, human trafficking, and alliances between the government, slum mafias, sex workers, and police. In *The Adventures of China Iron*, the author subversively reconstructs the celebrated poem of nineteenth-century author José Hernández, *Martín Fierro* (1872), considered one of the foundational texts of Argentine literature and popular culture. Hernández's poem follows the life of the gaucho Fierro, who was forced to yield his freedom and individuality to the social and material changes that invaded his beloved *pampas*. The poem denounced the abuse and neglect that gauchos suffered from landowners, the military, and the Argentine political establishment.

In *The Adventures of China Iron*, however, we don't follow the gaucho's itinerary. Instead, we witness the emancipatory journey of Martín Fierro's abandoned wife, Josefina China Iron, in what becomes a nomadic utopia that disseminates the concept of the nation and transforms the Pampas landscape—named as a “desert” in nineteenth-century literature—into a lively and plural geography. Where Hernández's *Martín Fierro* narrates the “extraordinary pain” of the gaucho, Cabezón Cámara situates the liberation of China. China, pronounced ‘cheena’, is the designation for female from the Quechua language, and Iron is the English word for Fierro, acting as a reference to Hernández's fictional character. China Iron begins to travel across the pampas in a covered wagon with her new-found friend, and soon to become lover, a Scottish woman named Liz. While Liz provides China with a sentimental education and schools her in the habits of the British Empire, their eyes are opened to the wonders of Argentina's richly diverse flora and fauna, cultures and languages, and national struggles. These encounters and learnings are accompanied by rich depictions of ingredients and culinary rituals that China and Liz share with each other. After a clash with the author who ‘stole’ Martín Fierro's poems, Colonel Hernández, and a drunken orgy with gauchos, China and Liz eventually find refuge and a peaceful future in a utopian indigenous community, the river-dwelling Iñchiñ people. Among them, China and Liz create their own and particular foodway; that is, a new group of customs and practices around food that reflect the liberation process they have experienced through their journey.

Nomadism and displacement mark in the novel the fluid identities of Josefina/China and Liz. For instance, Josefina adopts the gender-neutral nickname of Joe. She also dresses sometimes as a man, and the narrator often refers to her with masculine pronouns. In a similar way, Cabezón Cámara outlines what I understand as a queer culinary project in which the exchange and fusion of ingredients and the manner of cooking them establish a new social order in the Argentine pampas.

The novel is divided into three sections and in each of them, cooking and food accompany the sexual, erotic, and gender identity transformations of the characters. In “El desierto” (the desert), the encounter between

China and Liz is established through the search for a common language, which fuses English and Spanish, and the flavors that each woman begin to explore from each other as they travel across the pampas:

That night Liz made a stew out of an armadillo that I'd caught and butchered. She cooked the poor creature in its own shell. She added ingredients that I was beginning to recognize; a mixture of onion, garlic and ginger with cloves, cinnamon, cardamom, chilli pepper, cumin and mustard seeds. Everything bubbled away in the shell, and when it was done, Estreya [a dog they adopted while traveling] and I had our first taste of spicy food. Everything we were experiencing was new to us; ideas, sensations and even our taste buds were expanding under the British Empire. (Cabezón Cámara 2017, 22)

In “Food, Self, and Identity” Claude Fischler establishes that human beings mark their identification with a group or culture when they manage to specify what they eat and, moreover, in what quantities they eat of the foodstuff that identifies them (Fischler 1988, 280). Thus, China initially identifies with the cow and the armadillo of the quote that belongs to the *gaucho* culture and Liz is characterized for her consumption of whiskey, tea, and curry, signs of her imperial origin. But soon they begin to fuse together ingredients and traditions, and the creation of this new and blended food system is also reflected in the deeper awareness that each character gains of themselves and each others. As China can name and distinguish what she and Liz eat, she begins to name herself as Josefina, abandoning the generic China. The culinary system also provides her with a structure through which to name and explore her sexual attraction to Liz (Fischler 1988, 283).

As in the previously analyzed texts by Gorriti and Mercado, the description of the recipe with which Liz cooks a local animal (the armadillo) becomes a means of cultural, linguistic, and culinary knowledge. Although this knowledge takes place in a colonial enclave in which the British woman is the one who brings in the novelty of techniques and flavor combinations, the scene, however, deconstructs the gendered division of labor and the distinction between public and private culinary practices. China hunts and learns how to cook using foreign ingredients, and so does Liz. The classic distinction that Claude Lévi-Strauss established in “the culinary triangle” between “endo-cuisine”—prepared for domestic use between small groups - and “exo-cuisine”—designated for guests and usually associated with the roasting technique - cannot be applied as a guiding principle in the lives of these two nomadic women (Lévi-Strauss 2013, 42–43). China and Liz propose non-binary dynamics of food preparation that align with their progressive detachment of traditional forms of expressing their gender and sexuality.

Hence, the culinary exchanges between China and Liz reconfigure heteronormative food practices. They appropriate foods that represent the cornerstones of the English and Argentine diets and their most sacred

heterosexual rituals in order to represent queer sexuality. Also, following Julia Ehrhardt's (2006, 96) argument on her analysis of Chicana lesbian writers, China and Liz pervert traditional culinary gender roles. This dynamic of queering foodways can also be perceived in the description of two of the culinary traditions that define, in principle, the origin of each character: the fabrication of whiskey, "that elixir of life in England" (Cabezón Cámara 2017, 28), and *charqui*, a type of dehydrated meat typical of the Andean and southern regions of South America that has been used since pre-Columbian times to preserve meat for prolonged periods. Josefina explains the manufacturing of the whiskey:

They soaked the grain [barley] in hot water and left it until it sprouted. Then they dried it using a smoke made with tree branches, with sticks and sometimes with peat, a kind of earth made of plants that haven't become earth yet. We could make whisky. We really could: we just had to get some grain, some oak barrels and funnels, some stills with long iron tubes. The snag is how long you have to wait: it takes whisky twelve years in the barrels before it's ready. I liked whisky and I also liked the fact that I liked it: I wanted to be British too. (Cabezón Cámara 2017, 28–29)

China fantasizes about becoming other, a Brit like Liz, through the replica of the whiskey recipe. The idea of transferring English knowledge to the Argentine pampas, and transforming herself in that exchange, reiterates the characters' intention to defy not only culinary but also social conventions. The same happens with the *charqui* (jerky), which changes its nature when it is prepared by Liz and not the gauchos or the indigenous people of the region:

[W]e added even more bones to the world every time we slaughtered one of the hundreds of cows following us. We didn't kill many: they're big animals and once we'd butchered one we would cure it making a delicious jerky that Liz had perfected. First, she'd plunge the fillets into salt and then steep them in curry and honey. When she reckoned they were ready she'd put them on the fire for a while: they crunched in your mouth, melted salty-sweet and spicy on your tongue, then burned down to your stomach. (Cabezón Cámara 2017, 48)

Liz alters the pre-Columbian recipe adding curry and honey to the preparation. But, *charqui* itself is an already adapted recipe, since the gauchos prepared it with cow's meat (a sign of Spanish colonization) instead of using the native meats of the guanacos or alpacas that were initially employed by the indigenous groups. The novel presents continuous experimentations with recipes, as well as forms of naming ingredients and elements of the flora and fauna of the pampas. For instance, the cows are called "four-legged plants" and the plants are referred to as "cow cactuses" (Cabezón Cámara 2017, 61).

These fluctuations in the acts of naming and cooking contrast with the authoritarian life that Liz and China encountered in "el fortín," the military

fort on the limits of the national territory that gives name to the second part of the novel. In the fort, Colonel Hernández “had a specific place for everyone” (Cabezón Cámara 2017, 126). On a night when a party was offered, gauchos were fed with fruits and caña (a spiced rum traditional from Argentina), while the officers had whiskey and lamb curry prepared by Liz (Cabezón Cámara 2017, 127). The orgy that came after everyone was drunk resulted in anger and accusations the next day, from women toward their husbands, from the husbands toward the women, and between other men and women who blamed each other of inappropriate behaviors. Ultimately, the conflict was resolved with physical violence through a bloody fight, as if the fort did not offer a space for such sexual and sensorial experiences in the first place.

In contrast to what China and Liz witnessed in the fort and toward the end of the novel, the “Tierra adentro” (Indian Territory) section proposes another culinary queer fusion. It is presented in the form of a lifestyle in community with the indigenous people, in what resembles a Golden Age where food abounds, ingredients recover their ceremonial uses, and recipes are again *queered* to incorporate their already hybrid gaucho and English roots. An indigenous Guaraní component is also included, both in language and cuisine as the following quote shows:

We also have a herb that you smoke that tastes of itself, of its own sweet and rough flower, and also of warm bread and cheese rolls and marmalade made from lemon and narã, the bitter orange from the deltas, a happy herb called vy’aty that takes away pain and fills our eyes with warmth, that makes the world more friendly and other people companions we can laugh with. (Cabezón Cámara 2017, 183)

Once China and Liz enter the indigenous territory by the opulent Paraná river, the second in length only to the Amazon in South America, they are amazed by the encounter of yet other forms of possible life. China’s former partner, Fierro, is there living as a woman with another gaucho, Cruz, and the children he had with China. Liz also finds her husband there and they all create a community with the local Guaraní people. China describes their lives as plentiful; they do not need to work nor vote, and there is no need of rigid family structures since they all live together and are governed by their own will, all while nature provides them food and medicine.

Under this new order in which *The Adventures of China Iron* ends, Cabezón Cámara reconfigures gender relations in an emancipatory manner through food preparation. The colonial violence that defined the South American territory for centuries and the Argentine *gaucho* culture, characterized by violence toward animals (mainly cows and horses) and by the prevalence of masculine power, is completely revised in an equally modified

realm of the kitchen. Cooking is no longer a synonym of women's subjugation but a nomadic and open space in which two women feel free to explore their fluid gender identities by preparing food for each other. When cooking, Liz and China do not embody the traditional role of the *chinas*—the female companions of the *gauchos*—, whose role was passive and domestic in always attending to the needs of others, but they appear as cooks who enjoy both cooking and eating for their own pleasure and for the communal good (Ehrhardt 2006, 96). Hence, while the “adventures” with food have been culturally constructed as a masculine quality (Cairns and Jonhston 2016, 142), *The Adventures of China Iron* leads us to reread, from its queer recipes, the national territory as fluctuant and transgender. Cabezón Cámara's novel invites us to question heteronormative assumptions about food, gender, and identity, and it gives us the opportunity to enrich food readings from new and more inclusive perspectives.

Conclusion

The women writers presented in this essay have shown, in their own particular ways, that criticism and rejection do not constitute the entire history of the connections between cooking and feminism. Paraphrasing Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, cooking as an everyday act allows the individual to subvert some of the structures that support the very act of cooking itself in the circuit of consumption. Thus, in the writers' references to cooking, there is not necessarily a reproduction of gender stereotypes, but rather the production of other modes of expression. From a feminist food studies approach, it is fundamental to embrace the intersectionality that cooking and food propose in order to visualize forms of oppression and privilege, including gender, sexuality, and other identity components that are experienced and take shape in relation to the culinary world (Parker et al. 2019, 1).

The question of the complex relationship between cooking and feminism is not a novel nor an unchallenged one. But, it also is not a dated debate. It is an issue that posits new challenges and demands as societies phase into new local and global existences. A literary exploration of women's perception of cooking and the kitchen help us to historicize and trace possible answers to these contemporary concerns around gender politics and domestic work. And bringing examples from Argentina speaks of a major attention needed to Latin American voices that could join in dialogue with current and global debates on gender and food and add to this conversation their own regional nuances. For Argentine women, cooking has represented a language to express their desire for authorship, political engagement, intersectional alliances and sexual liberation throughout history. Juana Manuela Gorriti, Tununa Mercado and Gabriela Cabezón

Cámara manifest that cooking has been and continue to be a component of feminist quests.

Notes

1. Stacy J. Williams (2014) has studied, for instance, American second-wave feminists who used food and cooking as a feminist expression.
2. Besides the works cited in this paragraph, other studies focusing on the connections on gender/feminism and food are: Adolph (2009), Cairns and Johnston (2016), Segal and Demos (2016), and Goodman (2016). On Latin America, see also Castilleja Magdaleno (2005) and Scott (2009).
3. For Gorriti's *Cocina ecléctica* see Elisabeth Austin (2008) and Paula Caldo (2017). For Tununa Mercado, consult the works by Sandra Jara (1996) and María Claudia André (2001).
4. The term *criollo* in Argentina usually indicates local origins but of Spanish roots, and it differentiates from indigenous. Rebekah Pite discusses the complexities of the term in her article "La cocina criolla" (2016).
5. On Argentina's formation of a national cuisine, see Pilcher (2012) and Pite (2016).
6. Besides her work on women cooks, Paula Caldo has worked with Marcela Fugardo on the edition of *La cocinera argentina* (1881) by Virginia Pueyrredón de Pelliza. Fugardo has also edited the cookbook manuscript by María Varela (1837-1910) published in 2018 under the title *Un recetario familiar rioplatense* (A Family Recipe Book from the River Plate). Carina Perticone edited in 2020 *La perfecta cocinera Argentina* (1888), the first Argentine cookbook by Teófila Benavento, the pseudonym used by Buenos Aires socialite Susana Torres de Castex.
7. Laura Shapiro has analyzed the influence of domestic science education in nineteenth-century American women in *Perfection Salad* (1989) and Paula Caldo has made similar arguments for the Argentine context in *Un cachito de cocinera* (2017).
8. See, for instance, Amelia Palma, "Párrafos sobre Economía Doméstica," *Revista de Educación*, no. 19 (1883): 6- 11.
9. Some of the Argentine editions or editions available in Argentina of Carreño's book include an adaptation for public Argentine schools published in Paris by Librería Española de Garnier in 1897 (*Compendio del manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras: arreglado por él mismo para el uso de las escuelas de ambos sexos y adoptado en las escuelas públicas de Buenos Aires*), an edition in 1863, and 1873 by Imprenta Americana in Buenos Aires, another from 1872 printed in the province of Jujuy by Imprenta del Estado, and another one from 1871 by Imprenta Salteña in the province of Salta.
10. On the origins of feminist groups and the first uses of feminism as a concept in Argentina, see Asunción Lavrín (1995) and Dora Barrancos (2005).
11. For an in-depth analysis of hygienist theories and the first feminists in Argentina as well as references on women's hygienist publications and endeavors, see Asunción Lavrín (1995) and Marcela Nari (2005).
12. María Claudia André connects "Antieros" with the concept of *jouissance* developed by Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous (André 2001, 139).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Abarca, Meredith E. 2006. *Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-Class Mexican and Mexican American Women*. College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press.
- Abella, María. 1965. *Ensayos Feministas*. Montevideo: Editorial El Siglo Ilustrado.
- Adolph, Andrea. 2009. *Food and Femininity in Twentieth-Century British Women's Fiction*. Farnham, England: Ashgate.
- André, María Claudia. 2001. *Chicanas and Latin American Women Writers Exploring the Realm of the Kitchen as a Self-Empowering Site*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- André, María Claudia. 2002. "Commentary to the Translation of 'Antieros.'" *Gastronomica* 2 (3):27–8.
- Austin, Elisabeth. 2008. "Reading and Writing Juana Manuela Gorriti's *Cocina Ecléctica*: Modeling Multiplicity in Nineteenth-Century Domestic Narrative." *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 12:31–44.
- Avakian, Arlene V., and Barbara Haber. 2005. *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Barrancos, Dora. 2005. "Primera recepción del término "feminismo" en la Argentina." <https://www.labrys.net.br/labrys8/principal/dora.htm>
- Bastian Duarte, Ángela. 2012. "From the Margins of Latin American Feminism: Indigenous and Lesbian Feminisms." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38 (1):153–78. doi: 10.1086/665946.
- Bilbija, Ksenija. 1996. "Spanish American Women Writers: Simmering Identity over a Low Fire." *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 20 (1):8. doi: 10.4148/2334-4415.1384.
- Bird, Delys. 1998. "Bodily Desires and Narrative Pleasures: Food and Feminism in Two Contemporary Australian Novels." *Antipodes* 12 (2):95–9.
- Bower, Anne, ed. 1997. *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Cabezón Cámara, Gabriela. 2017. *Las aventuras de la China Iron*. Buenos Aires: Literatura Random House.
- Cairns, Kate, and Josée Johnston. 2016. *Food and Femininity*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Caldo, Paula. 2017. *Un cachito de cocinera*. Rosario: Editorial Casagrande.
- Castilleja Magdaleno, Diana. 2005. "Variantes de sazón: la cocina en el ensayo femenino mexicano y caribeño." *America* 33 (1):167–76. doi: 10.3406/ameri.2005.1719.
- Counihan, Carole M. 1999. *The Anthropology of Food and Body*. London: Routledge.
- Counihan, Carole, and Steven L. Kaplan. 1998. *Food and culture: identity and power*. New York: Routledge.
- Denegri, Francesca. 1996. *El abanico y la cigarrera: la primera generación de mujeres ilustradas en el Perú*. Lima: Flora Tristán.
- Ehrhardt, Julia C. 2006. "Towards Queering Food Studies: Foodways, Heteronormativity, and Hungry Women in Chicana Lesbian Writing." *Food and Foodways* 14 (2):91–109. doi: 10.1080/07409710600691931.
- Federici, Silvia. 2004. *Caliban and the Witch*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Ferguson, Kennan. 2020. *Cookbook Politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Fischler, Claude. 1988. "Food, Self and Identity." *Social Science Information* 27 (2):275–92. doi: 10.1177/053901888027002005.
- Goldthwaite, Melissa. 2017. *A. Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

- González Stephan, Beatriz. 1999. "Cuerpos de la nación: cartografías disciplinarias." https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/2077/3213/2/anales_2_gonzalez.pdf
- Goodman, Emily Elizabeth. 2016. "Feeding Feminism: Food and Gender Ideology in American Women's Art, 1960-01979." PhD diss., University of California, San Diego. <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/6kc3f7s2>.
- Gorriti, Juana Manuela. 1890. *Cocina Electica*. Buenos Aires: Félix Lajouane.
- Jara, Sandra. 1996. "Escritura, sexualidad y erotismo en Canon de alcoba de Tununa Mercado." *Homenaje a José Carlos Mariátegui en el centenario de su nacimiento (1894-1994)*, 417–23.
- Larrosa, Lola. 1877 [1994]. "El Hogar." In *La Alborada del Plata* 5. Reproduced in Francine Masiello, edited by *La mujer y el espacio público. El periodismo femenino en la Argentina del siglo XIX*. Buenos Aires: Feminaria Editora,
- Lawson, Nigella. 2018. "Home Cooking Can Be a Feminist Act." *Lenny*, April 10. <https://www.lennyletter.com/story/nigella-lawson-home-cooking-can-be-a-feminist-act>
- Leonardi, Susan J. 1989. "Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Riseholme, and Key Lime Pie." *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 104 (3):340–7. doi: 10.2307/462443.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 2013. "The Culinary Triangle." In *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, 40–7. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Mc Lean, Alice. 2013. "Feminist Food Studies. A Critical Overview." <http://www.alicemclean.net/feminist-food-studies.html>
- Mercado, Tununa. 1988. *Canon de alcoba*. Buenos Aires: Ada Korn
- Mercado, Tununa. 2002. "Antieros." *Gastronomica* 2 (3):25–8. Translated by Peter Kahn doi: 10.1525/gfc.2002.2.3.25.
- Nari, Marcela. 2005. *Políticas de maternidad y maternalismo político; Buenos Aires (1890-1940)*. Buenos Aires: Biblos.
- Ni Una Menos. 2018. "Amistad política + inteligencia colectiva. Documentos y manifiestos 2015/2018." <http://niunamenos.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/amistad-pol%C3%ADtica-inteligencia-colectiva-libro-num.pdf>
- Palma, Amelia. 1883. "Párrafos sobre Economía Doméstica." *Revista de Educación* 19:6–11.
- Parker, Jennifer, Jennifer Brady, Elaine Power, and Susan Belyea. 2019. *Feminist Food Studies*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Perticone, Carina. 2020. "Estudio Preliminar." In *La perfecta cocinera argentina*. Buenos Aires: Tusquets.
- Pilcher, Jeffrey. 2012. "Eating à la Criolla: Global and Local Foods in Argentina, Cuba, and Mexico." *IdeAs* 3:1–18.
- Pite, Rebekah. 2013. *Creating a Common Table in Twentieth-Century Argentina: Doña Petrona, Women, & Food*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Pite, Rebekah. 2016. "La Cocina Criolla: A History of Food and Race in Twentieth-Century Argentina." In *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*, edited by Paulina Alberto and Eduardo Elena, 99–125. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rappaport, Helen. 2001. *Encyclopedia of women social reformers*. Santa Barbara: ABCCLIO.
- Rodríguez, Laura Graciela. 2021. "¿Economía doméstica o labores? La educación femenina en la escuela: programas y libros de texto. Argentina, 1870–1920." *Historia y memoria de la educación* 14:615–41. doi: 10.5944/hme.14.2021.28974.
- Scott, Renée Sum. 2009. *What is Eating Latin American Women Writers: Food, Weight, and Eating Disorders*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.
- Segal, Marcia Texler, and Vasilikie P. Demos. 2016. *Gender and Food: From Production to Consumption and After*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing.

- Segato, Rita. 2003. *Las estructuras elementales de la violencia*. Brasilia: Série Antropologia. http://www.escuelamagistratura.gov.ar/images/uploads/estructura_vg-rita_segato.pdf
- Shapiro, Laura. 1986. *Perfect Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Warner, M. 1993. "Introduction." In *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, edited by Michael Warner, VII–XXXI. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Williams, Stacy. 2014. "A Feminist Guide to Cooking." *Contexts* 13 (3):59–61. doi: [10.1177/1536504214545763](https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504214545763).