

*Forum*

## Can a Rice Ball Be a Source of Food Activism?

Francesc Fusté-Forné\*

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### Introduction

When the Sicilian arancini were included in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2019, media and specialist Italian food blogs celebrated it as a global appreciation of a Sicilian culinary tradition. Arancini are defined as “an Italian dish consisting of small balls of rice, usually stuffed with meat or cheese and then fried” (Oxford English Dictionary 2022). In her book of Italian gastronomy, Del Conte (2013) also refers to arancini as stuffed rice croquettes. The Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies (MIPAAF) in Italy includes the *arancino di riso* in the list of Traditional Italian Agri-Food Products (PAT), and on December 13, the day of Saint Lucia, Arancini Day is celebrated.

This study is based on arancini as the most emblematic street food of the island, the king of the table (Privitera 2020), “a traditional food of Sicily and a symbol of Sicilian hospitality” (Zaccardelli and Cohen 2021, 453). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2021) defines arancini as “a typical traditional product of Italian culture, a brand exported all over the world, a recipe based on rice fried in boiling oil, the filling of which can vary with meat or vegetarian ingredients.” This refers to the local and global relevance of dishes that are iconic of the places where they come from. However, can arancini be a source of food activism between eastern and western Sicily?

This study adds texture to the role of food activism in the construction of meaning and value (Counihan 2021) through the case of rice balls. While rice balls are the most iconic street food in Sicily, they also illustrate an example of activism through food and language. This study discusses the relevance of arancini as a symbol of the island, and it draws on the differences between the Eastern and Western versions. The regionalities manifested in arancini are a source of food activism that aims to protect and promote the relationships between culture, history, and tourism.

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\* Department of Business, University of Girona, Spain; Sustainability and Resilience Institute New Zealand, New Zealand; and Department of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Sciences, University of Palermo, Italy

## A Debate Around an Island Street Food

According to Wright (2003), Sicily's culinary heritage has been shaped by the groups of people who have arrived on the island over the centuries, which include the Greeks, Carthaginians, Normans and Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Berbers, French, Spaniards, Italians, and Americans. This resulted in the arrival of new foods such as arancini, "introduced during Arab control of the island (831-1061 CE)" (Zaccardelli and Cohen 2021, 454). Specifically, Arabic cuisine has largely influenced the configuration of the Sicilian rice balls (Nessi, 2018), and even the name arancini, meaning "little oranges," is the Arabic word for oranges (Wright 2003). The arancini brand is therefore "derived from the shape and the colour, both similar to an orange fruit" (Barone and Pellerito 2020, 25).

Sgroi, Modica, and Fusté-Forné (2022), in their paper about the traditions and market perspectives of Palermitan street food, pointed out that *arancina* "is a small timbale of breaded rice seasoned with ragù or ham and mozzarella breaded with egg and fried. It has a conical shape, about 10 cm, or round. According to the Accademia della Crusca [the Italian literary academy], the 'arancina' is the one prepared in western Sicily and in Palermo, while the final 'o' is conical (like Etna). In fact, there are over a hundred versions with pistachio and salmon, among others, and even the dessert with chocolate cream" (2). Previous research has expanded this debate among the eastern and western sides of the island, where these rice balls emerged as a source of food activism among Sicilians.

Food activism aims to protect and promote food democracy (Counihan 2014). Food activists "work to change not only the way we eat but the ways we live, work and govern ourselves" (Alkon and Guthman 2017, 2). This is an example of movements such as Slow Food, which contribute to the valorisation of traditional knowledge about food (Berno and Fusté-Forné, 2020). The understanding of food includes the dynamics of production, distribution, sale, and consumption (House 2018). Food activism embraces actions and discourses, which "may range from aiming for an overreaching political impact to simply seeking closer ties between producers and consumers on the local stage" (Siniscalchi and Counihan 2014, 7). This research understands Sicily as a place of activism and arancini as a space of activism—a manifestation of the island's identity and everyday lives through food and language.

In this sense, Zaccardelli clarifies the use of the specific words to refer to the iconic street food: "I use the spelling 'arancini' to refer to both plural and singular forms of the word and to avoid regional debates over its spelling—people on opposite sides of the island argue over whether it should be spelled arancino [singular] and arancini [plural], or rather arancina [singular] and arancine [plural]" (2020, 1). The first difference between the two versions refers to the final vowel of the name. The western, or Palermo, version is the arancina (gender name: female) and the eastern, or Catania, version is the arancino (gender name: male), "typically produced and served in Messina, Ragusa, Siracusa provinces, and above all in the central province surrounding Mount Etna: Catania" (Barone and Pellerito 2020, 24).

In addition, the debate also refers to the culinary preparation and the shape of the final product sold to consumers, which elevates the issue to a tourism dimension. Arancini are a specific

tourism attraction throughout Sicily, as observed in other street-food-based tourism research (see Fusté-Forné 2021). Also, consumers “use food to anchor, express, and traverse cultural identities in a globalizing world” (Seo, Cruz, and Fam 2015, 501). Street food places, markets, and restaurants offer arancini as part of the culinary offerings of the island. However, this attraction is also communicated from the differences in language and shape (see figs. 1, 2, and 3), where the managers and waiters of the food places themselves become food activists who protect and promote their identity through food. For example, the following was observed by this researcher at the Ballarò market in Palermo. While at the market, a group of young people, probably from eastern Sicily, stopped by a street food place and proclaimed, pointing to the rice balls: “Arancino!” The waitress replied: “No, arancina!” Drawing on the spelling debates explained above, gender is also a component of food activism (see also Counihan 2016).



FIGURE 1. Arancini served in a restaurant in Palermo.



FIGURE 2. *Arancina al burro* sold in a bakery in Cefalù.



FIGURE 3. *Arancino al pistacchio* served in a caffè in Catania.

Drawing from the general understanding of arancini as a fried rice ball (Marino et al. 2010), the figures that illustrate this study show that the shape remains as an iconic difference between western and eastern Sicilian types of arancini. While the arancina is spherical and links to the original version of the street food product, the arancino represents a cone that evokes Mount Etna, which strongly communicates a Sicilian sense of place. According to Barone and Pellerito (2020),

the representation of Mount Etna in a street food (SF) product, the arancino, should feature four elements: “(1) The conic shape of this SF should be similar to a *vulcan* [volcano]; (2) The exterior crisp layers should be similar to the upper surface of Mount Etna; (3) The inner parts of *arancino*, containing chopped meat and red sauces such as *ragù*, should indicate the reddish lava exiting from the inner layers of vulcans; (4) And, last but not least, the opening of hot arancino pieces should remember the inner and hot vapours exiting from the Mount Etna” (27-28). The embeddedness of food in the culture and history of a place, as it happens with the rice balls in Sicily, illustrates the relevance of local culinary heritage, which is later manifested in the food experiences gathered by both locals and visitors. In this sense, the local and global tensions have also resulted in the preparation of the Sicilian rice balls with a never-ending variety of fillings (Barone and Pellerito 2020), such as those illustrated in figure 4.



FIGURE 4. Arancine available in a caffè in Palermo.

## Conclusion

This study does not only show arancini as a symbol of Sicily (see, e.g., Zaccardelli 2020), but it also contributes to the understanding of culinary differences, which also arise in other parts of the world in places that are geographically close. These differences are a source of food activism that is not only manifested in the culinary preparation of the product—rice balls—but also through language, the name, marketing, and shape, and through dining out places (see, e.g., Counihan 2021). This phenomenon, which is observed in different cities throughout Sicily, not only in Palermo and Catania, develops a sense of regionalization that is protected and promoted through the street food traditions in western and eastern Sicily. From a tourism perspective, whatever the rice ball is made of and wherever the rice ball comes from, the taste of arancini is a taste of Sicily. Visitors, as locals do, explore places through tastes, which requires that residents activate the idiosyncrasies that define and differentiate them at local, regional, and national levels, placing the



rice ball as a unique street food that is currently a diplomat of Sicilian, Italian, and Mediterranean cuisine around the world. This study may also inspire other street food forms of activism that protect and promote the identity, the integrity, and the influences of local cultures on food in islands.

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