
Revolutionary Landscapes and Kitchens of Refusal: Tomato Sauce and Sovereignty in Egypt

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a cultural history of *tasbika*, a tomato-based cooking technique, as a window into transformations of sovereignty in colonial and postcolonial Egypt. It draws on cookbooks, popular magazines and oral histories to argue that *tasbika*'s relatively recent emergence as one of the country's most ubiquitous home cooking methods was made possible not only by state-led industrialisation and modernisation projects, but also through a form of sovereignty wielded by women working in their home kitchens. This article describes this 'kitchen sovereignty' as an everyday form of power exercised by home cooks making decisions about how to manage scarce resources and feed their families. Moving beyond questions of food policies and market supply, this study of food and power centres the domestic labour that home cooks performed to transform raw ingredients into the flavours of everyday life in Egypt.

Anny: Did your grandmother know *tasbika*?

Rania: Of course! Where do you think my mother learned it?

– Interview with Rania, born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1952

The exchange above centres on *tasbika* (tas-BEE-ka), a tomato-based stewing technique and perhaps the most common method Egyptians use to cook vegetables today. Like many other Egyptian women, Rania describes *tasbika* as part of a culinary repertoire passed down through multiple generations in her family.¹ Alongside Egyptian mainstays like *ful mudammas* (slow-cooked fava beans) and *mulukhiya* (a leafy-green mallow), *tasbika* recurs in interview narratives like Rania's as part of a core set of national dishes. Frequently narrated as passed down from mother to daughter, such foods are often described as traditions unaltered by the social, economic and political changes of the twentieth century. During regular visits to Egypt for fieldwork between 2015 and 2019, I had dozens of conversations about *tasbika*. One interlocutor called it 'the mother of all dishes'; another, 'the most basic Egyptian food'.² And yet unlike *ful mudammas* and *mulukhiya*, whose histories are documented going back for centuries in Egypt, *tasbika* is undeniably modern.³ While Rania and many others her age had

memories of their grandmothers making *tasbika*, it is unlikely that *their* grandmothers would have said the same.

This article presents an account of *tasbika*'s relatively recent emergence as a window into the history of modern Egypt, with a particular focus on the role of women's culinary labour in the decades following independence (1950s through 1980s). Underlying *tasbika*'s appearance and swift rise to ubiquity are profound transformations in the forms of sovereignty that shaped Egypt's food systems: *tasbika* was made possible by dramatic state interventions like the damming of the Nile and the industrialisation of Egypt's agriculture and economy. But these conventional expressions of sovereignty, through which colonial and postcolonial Egyptian states exerted control over territory, offer an incomplete account of how *tasbika* came to be. While state interventions profoundly impacted the nature of Egyptian home kitchens, it was within those domestic spaces that women wielding another form of sovereignty produced, refined and popularised *tasbika* itself.

Alongside an account of state-driven transformations and interventions legible as conventional forms of sovereignty, I identify and elucidate 'kitchen sovereignty': an everyday form of power exercised by home cooks making decisions about how to manage (often scarce) resources and feed their families. My conceptualisation of kitchen sovereignty is akin to what Lauren Berlant describes as the 'personal or practical sovereignty' typical of reproductive activities like providing and consuming food – conscious and meaningful, although not always explicitly counterhegemonic.⁴ In the context of twentieth-century Egypt, kitchen sovereignty is a sphere less of direct political resistance than of creative and strategic refusal. Kitchen sovereignty explains how women working in kitchens selectively incorporated new ingredients and technologies into a living, evolving culinary tradition in ways that belied efforts to canonise a national cuisine or standardise citizens' diets.

In Egypt, both forms of sovereignty shifted considerably over the course of the twentieth century, and they were connected in important ways: dams that altered the rhythm of the growing seasons also powered factories that equipped home cooks with new tools for processing and preserving foods. While acknowledging the importance of agricultural policies and market supply, this study of food and power moves beyond them, centring the domestic labour – often unremunerated and thus excluded from conventional economic calculations – that home cooks performed to transform raw ingredients into an entirely new set of everyday flavours. I contend that *tasbika* represents a useful illustration of precisely this kind of transformation, entangled with state policies and discourses but not reducible to their effects. Food scholars have argued that 'cuisine and other seemingly mundane aspects of daily life compose an important part of the cultures that bind people into national communities'.⁵ *Tasbika* illustrates that in Egypt, it was not state policy but rather kitchen sovereignty, wielded largely by urban, middle-class home cooks, that determined the particular sensory and affective attributes of a cooking style that emerged to bind Egyptians to their national community.

Before explaining how *tasbika* emerged as an effect of kitchen sovereignty, it is worth briefly explaining the technique itself. The basic steps for preparing a *tasbika*-style dish are as follows: brown a chopped onion in *samna* (clarified butter); next, add pieces of red meat (optional), then a fresh vegetable, any desired seasonings like herbs

or spices and, most importantly, a significant quantity of *salsa*, which in Egyptian Arabic translates specifically to tomato puree. Most cooks agree that the key to a good *tasbika* is stewing this mixture for a long time over a low flame until the tomato sauce is significantly reduced and the liquid fat ‘rises to the top’.

While this is the basic template, there are many variations and differing opinions on precisely what *tasbika* is and how to prepare it well. Here, I therefore approach *tasbika* as a flexible umbrella technique used by Egyptian cooks to cook an array of vegetables, rather than as a single dish or fixed recipe whose ‘authentic’ origin can be identified.⁶ By its very nature, *tasbika* is always being made and remade, tweaked and reinvented; it is a foundational technique that has been transmitted not in the realm of textual recipes so much as embodied knowledge and colloquial speech. By embodied knowledge, I mean forms of sensory culinary knowledge that cannot be captured in written or spoken words or in precise quantitative timings or measurements. This knowledge is expressed through a complex set of instincts, habits and strategies that I witnessed countless times during my fieldwork: a cook might initially follow a written recipe for a pastry, for example, but then make final adjustments based on tactile and visual cues. When I interviewed women about various culinary techniques, their verbal instructions were peppered with caveats emphasising the need to monitor a dish’s progress with one’s judgement based on its smell, look, taste, feel and even its sound. The importance of embodied knowledge to cooking is by no means unique to Egypt or to home cooking. But it is of particular importance to *tasbika* because so few printed recipes from the period studied here name or describe it explicitly; to trace its history requires a focus on vernacular descriptions and embodied knowledge.⁷

Rachel Lauden describes how modern cuisines emerged through and alongside a number of other social transformations: the ‘nutrition transition’ that expanded access to caloric needs among the industrialised working classes, the association of new ‘middling cuisines’ with expanding middle classes and national culinary styles, and cultures of domesticity that nurtured them in gendered ways.⁸ Using an everyday, commonplace culinary technique as its framing, this article explores how these interrelated processes unfolded in twentieth-century Egypt. Outlining *tasbika*’s history partly entails describing the impacts of British rule on Egypt’s economy and agriculture, as well as further alterations to the food system as Egypt decolonised after 1952. It is also bound up in Egyptian ideals of bourgeois domesticity, which had flourished during the colonial period and emphasised the importance of women’s culinary knowledge to society at large. Those ideals were repurposed and reconceptualised to suit the ‘working woman’ celebrated by the postcolonial state. Home cooks navigated all of these changes on a daily basis, adapting to new tools as well as new obstacles as they fed themselves and their families.

Tracing these shifts through the history of *tasbika* serves two connected aims: first, it clarifies the relationship between material conditions and culinary cultures. Rather than reading cuisine as a direct reflection or effect of increased access to irrigation or the emergence of industrial food processing plants, for example, I suggest that cuisine mediates such changes as part of a social process that is both contingent and continually unfolding. Following Raymond Williams, I read cuisine as a form of culture emerging from ‘social experiences *in solution*’ rather than formed as deliberate or explicit responses to ideological imperatives.⁹

Second, I argue that understanding this process of mediation requires examining the role of gendered domestic labour. It was largely women's work that transformed a set of ingredients into a technique with a specific culinary aesthetic and flavour profile that continues to feed millions daily.¹⁰ Kitchen sovereignty explains the history of *tas-bika* not as a direct or predictable effect of large-scale, state-driven transformations, nor as a singular canonical recipe, but rather as an evolving repertoire of creative and improvised choices about resource use. In exercising this form of sovereignty, Egyptian home cooks responded to ongoing changes in their food system, often in unpredictable, inconsistent or contradictory ways. State modernisation projects may have transformed Egyptian agriculture and altered the means by which markets and kitchens were supplied and equipped; but it was home cooks, the vast majority of them women, who completed the work of feeding the nation. They did so, moreover, in ways that did not always correspond with the principles and techniques that appeared in contemporaneous cookbooks and written recipes, many of which were produced by state institutions in attempts to standardise and dictate national tastes.¹¹ Accordingly, my methodology places particular emphasis on vernacular and embodied forms of culinary knowledge not always represented in text. This distinction should be understood in light of the fact that Arabic is a diglossic language: the written and spoken forms differ considerably, exacerbating the potential distance between spoken and written expressions of culinary cultures.

Kitchen sources, kitchen methods

I draw primarily on two bodies of source material: print matter consisting of magazines and cookbooks written for Egyptian women, and oral histories. Both sets of sources focus on Egypt's urban middle classes. Following Lucie Ryzova's work on the 'local Egyptian middle-class culture' that emerged in the early to mid-twentieth century and the members of Egypt's 'middle strata' that identified with that culture, I am concerned less with an empirically defined middle class identifiable through income level than with a middle-class culture that oriented the values, desires and aspirations of an increasing number of Egyptians in the middle decades of the twentieth century.¹² In the kitchen, this urban Egyptian middle-class culture translated into a specific set of practices and technologies, from storing food in an electric refrigerator to learning new cooking techniques like white sauces and tomato-based red sauces that reflected urban, cosmopolitan culinary influences rather than local and regional ones.

Because my interview subjects come from a range of positions within the 'middle strata', their relationship to Egypt's dominant middle-class culture varies. Yet this culture remains an important referent for the study of this period in part because from the 1950s, the postcolonial regime emphasised that expanding access to elements of middle-class lifestyles, from modern domestic appliances to education, was a state priority. Moreover, the growing genre of culinary literature during this period, largely within cookbooks and magazines, overwhelmingly addressed itself to the figure of the middle-class housewife.

While print cookbooks and women's journals had been published in Egypt from the late nineteenth century onwards, largely produced for elite audiences, new examples of both genres emerged in the 1930s and 1940s. Their audience was the middle-class housewife, a new cultural ideal that gradually also came to be reflected, to a certain

extent, in demographic reality. The books and magazines I cite attest to the rise of the tomato as a desirable and attainable ingredient among their target audiences in Egypt's middle strata. Textual material from the two decades following the 1952 revolution offer additional context about ingredients and technologies relevant to making *tasbika*, from processed tomato products to new kitchen appliances.

Although these sources indirectly shed light on the rise of *tasbika* as an everyday cooking method, they almost never mention it by name or single it out as a foundational technique or a category of dishes. In a sense, this is a reflection of *tasbika*'s very nature as a flexible technique rather than a stable recipe. But one could say the same of French roux-based white sauces, which are, unlike *tasbika*, given copious attention in written recipes between the 1930s and the 1970s. To fully understand *tasbika*'s role in Egyptian food culture, including its life outside of textual sources, I rely on oral histories that offer descriptions of *tasbika* and its significance expressed in Egyptian colloquial Arabic. This methodology is indebted in part to a pivotal comment from an official at the Egyptian national archives. When we met, I was consulting home economics curricula and probate records with lists of kitchen utensils; she told me candidly that if I really wanted to understand the Egyptian kitchen, I should devote my energies to studying *tasbika* instead of bothering with written records (in which, she knew, *tasbika* would not appear).

Writing a history of Egyptian cuisine that deliberately focuses on a vernacular cooking technique like *tasbika* opens up a new way of theorising the relationship between gendered labour and food in Egypt. Because evidence about it largely stems from individual narratives expressed in everyday language, and reflecting women's embodied knowledge, it captures something that textual sources do not. This also means that accounts of *tasbika* offered by oral histories appear contradictory or inconsistent at times. Its marginality within the canonising impulses of written recipes means that it remains open to variations and adaptations; this only underscores its significance as a technique of vast applicability to a range of meals and contexts.¹³

The cookbooks and recipes that I do cite were mostly written by a handful of the most prolific cookbook authors of twentieth-century Egypt: Nazira Nicola, Bahiya 'Uthman and Basima Zaki Ibrahim. These women helped establish a new genre of cookbooks in the 1930s, and crucially they all continued to write and publish recipes in cookbooks and in magazine columns after 1952. Magazines offer recipes and menus as well as advertisements and reported articles that contain insights into how the top-down transformations of Egypt's agricultural and food systems filtered into popular culture and home kitchens. I draw primarily on material that dates from between the 1940s and the 1970s from three magazines: *Bint al-Nil* and *Hawwa*', both aimed at women, and *al-Musawwar*, a news and culture magazine aimed at a general audience.¹⁴ It is particularly productive to juxtapose *Bint al-Nil* and *Hawwa*' because while their respective founding editors had different stances towards the post-1952 regime, which manifested in their editorial content, the visions of culinary modernity they promoted featured overwhelmingly similar recipes and products.¹⁵

The majority of oral histories I draw upon are interviews I conducted myself. These interviews were designed as life histories that focused on culinary memories connected to kitchens, cooking and eating, and reflect the experiences of middle-class urban women who grew up and learned to cook between the 1940s and the 1980s. This

meant that all of my interview subjects recalled *tasbika* as a fixture of home cooking from their earliest food memories onwards.¹⁶ Because I interviewed them in domestic settings, transcripts often also included the voices of husbands, fathers, mothers and daughters who joined in the conversations; they are complemented by written field-notes generated from experiences cooking and eating with my interlocutors during many of the interviews. I supplemented these with data from oral histories collected by the Women and Memory Forum and archivists at the American University in Cairo.

The women I interviewed share a common generational orientation to *tasbika*: all of them are young enough to identify it as something their grandmother made but old enough to remember making *tasbika* before the introduction of blenders and refrigerators. They also had sufficient education to have some access to written recipes and other forms of culinary print culture. All are married, all are mothers and all have lived most of their lives in either Cairo or Alexandria, Egypt's two largest cities. Beyond these shared positionalities, however, my interview subjects come from a range of income levels and life experiences.¹⁷ Seeking not to identify an empirical middle-class category but rather trace the effects of local middle-class culture on cooking practices, I interpreted 'middle-class' broadly when identifying interview subjects. This is partly to emphasise the range of influences that Egyptian middle-class culture exerted on society and partly to capture a diversity of responses to its central tenets. My aim is not to present oral history data as the basis for a definitive account of *tasbika*, but rather to illustrate its very complexity and adaptability at the hands of different home cooks working in various times and places – and to pick up the story of *tasbika* where written sources leave off.¹⁸

Tasbika's elite prehistory

It is difficult to pinpoint when the tomato, indigenous to the Americas, first arrived in Egypt. It was almost certainly being cultivated in Egypt by the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁹

More circumstantial evidence suggests that it may have been introduced more than a century earlier: the first potential written mention of a tomato in Egypt of which I am aware is in a satirical poem composed in colloquial Egyptian Arabic in the 1680s.²⁰ Easier to trace is the history of using tomatoes as the base for sauces and stews in Egypt, which was likely due to Ottoman influence. Egypt was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in 1517, and even as Egypt became increasingly independent over the course of the nineteenth century, Ottoman cuisine remained a dominant factor in Egyptian culinary culture.²¹ Tülay Artan's research shows that tomatoes were listed in palace registers in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, starting in 1694, but that they only appear as a common component of a sauce for cooking vegetables in an 1844 cookbook.²² That cookbook was translated into Arabic and published in Egypt in 1878.²³ From that point, Egyptian cookbooks increasingly include tomato sauce as a foundational technique for cooking and serving vegetables: first in a cookbook genre aimed at professional chefs, then later in written recipes for Egyptian housewives.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, tomatoes became increasingly popular, though many were grown for export as local supplies remained relatively scarce.²⁴ Thora Stowell's *Anglo-Egyptian Cookery Book*, published in 1923 and written for colonial women managing households, mentions tomatoes in a month-by-month guide

outlining when various fruits and vegetables are available in Cairo and Alexandria. Stowell lists tomatoes in season from October through May, though ‘getting dear’ in April and ‘at their dearest’ in May. They are not listed as available at all from June through September, the period of the Nile’s annual flood.²⁵ Stowell’s book focuses on European foods, but a brief chapter on Egyptian dishes suggests that the technique today known as *tasbika* (Stowell does not use the term, but describes cooking vegetables ‘richly dosed with tomato’) was well known by that point.²⁶ Even so, the seasonality of its key ingredient, the tomato, would have made it inaccessible even to wealthy Egyptians for at least a third of the year.

By the end of the twentieth century, the availability of tomatoes in Egypt had drastically transformed, both through increased cultivation and extended growing seasons. Egyptian tomato production exceeded six million tonnes in 1999, having increased more than seven-fold in the preceding four decades.²⁷ Egypt has been one of the world’s top ten producers of tomatoes since at least the 1960s, and tomatoes have been among Egypt’s top ten produced commodities since 1969.²⁸ In a reversal of what Stowell describes in the 1920s, a 1998 profile of the tomato published by the Cairo University Herbarium notes that yields in the 1990s were highest in summer and autumn, adding that the southern governorate of Qena had become an important source for winter tomatoes.²⁹ The same source describes both fresh tomatoes and canned tomato puree, or *salsa*, as ‘important components of the local diet’, stating that in 1990, *salsa* made up ‘about one-sixth of the total production of the public food-processing companies’ in Egypt.³⁰ These developments made *tasbika* and other tomato-based dishes far more accessible to Egyptian households, extending their reach beyond the Ottoman cuisine long associated with elite kitchens. Indeed, sociologist Malak Rouchdy recently characterised Egyptian meals built around items like ‘vegetable stew cooked in onion and tomato sauce’ not as means to exhibit social distinction but rather ‘an example of a traditional, obsolete form of cooking, reflective of popular taste’.³¹ A primary factor in bringing about this reversal was the industrialisation of Egypt’s agriculture and economy – which extended the tomato’s growing seasons and provided new means to extend its shelf life through preservation.

Revolutionary tomatoes, landscapes of plenty

Many women I interviewed, all of them city dwellers, associated *tasbika* with the Egyptian countryside and cited it as part of their ongoing connection to rural Egyptian territory even after decades or generations of living in Cairo or Alexandria. ‘It’s related a great extent to rural connections’, one woman explained, reflecting on the cooking habits and geographic origins of various family members.³² Many categorised it as a rural cooking method that had resisted change as it migrated into urban kitchens, passed down from mother to daughter. ‘The peasants of Minya and people in Alexandria make it exactly the same!’ said Hanan, who was born in a southern village in 1940 and moved to the northern coastal city of Alexandria upon marriage.³³ She described it as something learned so early in childhood as to be nearly innate – in contrast to more recent introductions to the Egyptian kitchen like bechamel sauce. ‘I knew *tasbika* my whole life, from the hour I was born’, Hanan explained.³⁴ Nour, born in the mid-1960s, similarly described her grandmother’s and mother’s versions of *tasbika*

as identical, although the former was born in a southern governorate and the latter in Cairo.³⁵

But the Egyptian countryside was not a static place during the lifetimes of these women, nor of their mothers and grandmothers. Starting in the nineteenth century, a series of state projects transformed the Egyptian landscape in numerous ways, introducing cash crops, new irrigation technologies, roads and other infrastructure.³⁶ Among the most consequential was a series of Nile dams built at Aswan in Upper (southern) Egypt, initiated in the wake of the 1882 British occupation and continuing after Egypt's independence.³⁷ These dams disrupted the millennia-old flood-driven growing seasons of the Nile Valley and changed the texture and flavour of everyday life for urban Egyptians hundreds of miles away. Among other things, over time these dams helped make *tasbika* newly accessible to ordinary home cooks.

To start, the dams extended Egypt's arable land and growing season, creating the conditions for expanded tomato cultivation. According to 'Ali Hassan, an Egyptian nutrition expert who began systematically surveying Egyptian nutrition starting in the 1930s, Egyptian nutritionists 'sometimes referred to [the tomato] as the poor man's apple since it was rich in vitamin C and was available all year round'.³⁸ The tomato's newfound availability was soon reflected in cookbooks and magazines. In the 1940s, one Egyptian cookbook author described tomatoes as 'grown throughout the year', and another casually mentioned that 'many types of food are cooked in [tomato sauce]' as an afterthought added to the end of a recipe.³⁹ By 1948, a domestic science educator described a tomato-heavy *tasbika* as 'the basic method of cooking Egyptian vegetables'.⁴⁰ Suggested menus published in *Bint al-Nil* between 1946 and 1955 feature tomatoes in sauces and salads throughout the year, while many other vegetables (for example, cauliflower, cucumber, spinach, taro) appear only in season.⁴¹ In the years leading up to independence and decolonisation, it appears that tomatoes were growing in availability and popularity – and that they were increasingly divorced from seasonality.

As the tomato gained popularity, opposition to British rule gained momentum. A popular revolution in 1919 had led to limited political sovereignty for Egyptians. But discontent fuelled by post-war food shortages and the UN's decision to partition Palestine spurred new waves of popular protest in the late 1940s and early 1950s. These culminated in a period of sustained popular struggle in 1951–1952, leading to the overthrow of the British colonial administration (along with the Egyptian monarchy, a formerly Ottoman dynasty still nominally serving as Egypt's heads of state) by a group of Egyptian army officers. The new Egyptian state, helmed by Gamal 'Abdel Nasser between 1954 and 1970, implemented a series of reforms and projects that asserted Egyptian sovereignty over its territory and promised a new kind of life for Egyptians.

The home kitchen offers unique insights into the state policies of this era, particularly when it comes to the High Dam at Aswan, a massive infrastructural project whose many effects included changes to the home kitchen that made *tasbika* more accessible. Ahmed Shokr writes that the construction of the High Dam, which took place between 1960 and 1970, 'marked a turning point in thinking about rivers in Egypt, but not just because it brought river control under full Egyptian jurisdiction'.⁴² Beyond matters of irrigation, agriculture and food supply, he argues, from the 1940s onwards, Egyptian experts increasingly held the view that 'control of the Nile waters could also spur

much more ambitious projects of economic modernisation that could develop multiple sectors of the economy within a single unified plan'.⁴³ This vision had lasting implications for the home kitchen and its broader connections to Egyptian territory – and not merely through an expanded supply of fresh produce. The dam also powered factories that delivered a new range of consumer goods to Egyptians – items that had previously only been available as imports and thus prohibitively expensive for many. This affected the way *tasbika* was prepared in homes in multiple ways, from the introduction of industrially processed *salsa* to manufactured appliances like refrigerators, freezers and blenders.

Popular songs as well as advertisements in illustrated magazines proclaimed the connections between these large-scale infrastructure developments and Egyptians' daily lives. The song 'We Changed the Course of the Nile', sung by Egypt's most beloved diva Umm Kulthum, declares:

We changed the course of the Nile
My heavens, what a change!
This will be the change of our lifetime
And not only for the river itself.⁴⁴

The dam is depicted as revolutionising everyday reality in Egypt, leading to a 'brightly shining future *where factories run and vegetables grow on fallow land*'.⁴⁵ The lyrics speak directly to some of Nasser's broader policy aims – namely, investing revenues from agricultural surpluses to promote urbanisation and industrialisation – and also resonate with popular imagery that linked the state's transformation of Egypt's land and waterways to improvements in Egyptians' everyday lives.⁴⁶ Food companies nationalised in the 1950s produced canned *salsa*, which provided a much faster alternative to cooks than grating or juicing tomatoes by hand. Even before the nationalisation of the Egyptian press in 1960, magazines aimed both at women and at the general public featured a range of food and kitchen products, many produced by state-owned companies. The links between those products and state policies became explicit following the completing of the dam: advertisements from 1964 featured imagery that highlighted these links, with layered images of pots and pans made by nationalised companies, images of the dam and cornucopias bursting with fruits and vegetables.⁴⁷

The promotion of convenience foods like these was connected in part to the challenges involved in reconciling the 'working woman', a figure epitomising the state feminism of the Nasser era, with the residual domesticity culture of the pre-1952 era.⁴⁸ The latter had left an extensive domestic science curriculum for women and girls in Egyptian state schools, with textbooks and cookbooks that espoused the attributes of the ideal bourgeois housewife, including what and how she ought to cook. This figure ruled the domestic domain, efficiently managed the resources of the ascendant nuclear family household, and cooked meals herself rather than delegating that labour to paid domestic workers.⁴⁹ After 1952, authors and educators re-appropriated this material with a renewed emphasis on economy and on new technologies that could streamline cooking processes for women who worked outside the home during the day and were still expected to put dinner on the table for their families at night. Nicola, a popular cookbook author who had once co-written encyclopaedic cookbooks that detailed the

refinements of French cuisine, now wrote cookbooks whose titles promised ‘quick and economical dishes for the “working woman”’.⁵⁰ The High Institute for Domestic Science, established in the 1930s, was renamed the Higher Institute of Home Economics in the 1950s, training domestic science teachers that instilled the importance of modern cooking within the new generation.

In other words, Egyptian women were increasingly treated as a new consumer public. State-owned companies marketed a new, modern lifestyle complete with canned vegetables and refrigerators. For centuries, Egyptian preservation methods had transformed foodstuffs into entirely new ingredients: the fermented cheese *mish* made from scraps of dairy byproducts, *weka*, a dish often made from dried okra, an array of pickles, fermented fish. By contrast, new modes of preservation – facilitated by state-owned companies, highlighted in state curricula and advertised in state-owned or state-aligned magazines – promised the opposite: to change their core ingredients as little as possible. A 1956 magazine *salsa* advertisement, picturing a cascade of scarlet sauce falling abundantly into a bowl, boasted that it was made from the ‘choicest varieties of fresh tomatoes’.⁵¹ A 1959 advertisement in *Hawwa* reassured would-be customers that the canned vegetables it featured were ‘packaged automatically, direct from the fields, without the addition of any preservatives’.⁵² In many ways, the state promised the busy ‘working woman’ the best of both modern convenience and the luxurious flavours of a seasonal diet unencumbered by the time and labour required to pickle, ferment or preserve.

Crazy tomatoes: post-revolutionary scarcity at the market

Despite such revolutionary promises, these optimistic images did not always translate into abundance or affordability in urban food markets. Even as tomatoes became more available year-round, they were subject to price fluctuations and scarcity. Tomatoes are particularly susceptible to disease and pests, difficult to transport and more expensive in winter than in summer.⁵³ By the mid-1950s, the typical refrain of street vendors selling tomatoes in Cairo was ‘crazy tomatoes’ (*magnuna ya quta*), a reference to tomatoes’ propensity to vary wildly in price.⁵⁴ The price of tomatoes as a proxy for trust in the state’s ability to provide welfare for its citizens remains a feature of Egyptian society to this day; one scholar recently referred to the price of the tomato as ‘a kind of low-tech economic indicator of precarity’.⁵⁵ But high prices impacted other vegetables, too. State-owned companies presented canned foods as solutions to this problem: one 1959 advertisement placed images of canned *mulukhiya*, okra and peas next to a reproduced excerpt from a recent newspaper article about rising prices. ‘Why pay 25 *qirsh* for a *ratl* of okra?’ its text asked the reader, implying that the canned vegetables were a cheaper option.⁵⁶

In addition to price fluctuations, food shortages began to plague Egyptian society again in the late 1950s.⁵⁷ In response to mounting pressure, Nasser began to appoint ‘free market-oriented ministers’ to government posts in the 1960s.⁵⁸ By 1965, the government began to cut subsidies and incentivise private investment.⁵⁹ Things took a more dramatic shift after Egypt’s disastrous military defeat in 1967, during which it lost territory to Israel. This was a fatal blow for Nasser’s political project and marked the start of a period Egyptians associated even more strongly with scarcity. Sociologist Mona Abaza described scarcity as an ever-present theme in Egyptian daily life after

1967 ‘People were spending lots of time finding food and storing it ... queueing to buy state-subsidized chicken and sugar, getting food from the village. My mother would get bread and freeze it in large quantities’.⁶⁰ The state’s credibility when it came to fulfilling its revolutionary promises of plenty was increasingly in question.

In the early 1970s, Nasser’s successor, Anwar Sadat (president from 1970 to 1981), initiated a policy of economic liberalisation widely known as *Infitah*, or the ‘open door policy’, that significantly expanded foreign investment and privatisation. Food policy became more trade-oriented, shifting away from production for local consumption and towards an approach dependent upon food imports and aid, particularly from the United States.⁶¹ Between 1972 and 1975, imports increased four-fold; food made up a significant proportion of them.⁶² As Timothy Mitchell and Ray Bush have pointed out, these policies benefitted large landowners more than the average consumer.⁶³ A 1975 magazine article headline lamented: ‘It’s not just tomatoes that are “crazy”!’ The article exclaimed that ‘in our grandfathers’ day ... it seemed that everything in life was stable.’⁶⁴ Prices rose and fell at the speed of a tortoise – with the exception of the tomato, which had always been volatile, according to the article. But nowadays, it continued, meat, chicken, tea, sugar and other vegetables had prices as unpredictable and ‘crazy’ as the tomato’s. The article went on to detail a series of policy failures that was resulting in insufficient levels of vegetable production to meet the demand of Egyptian consumers.

Salma Serry writes poignantly of how her own grandmother, a graduate of Egypt’s formidable domestic science training institutions and an avid reader of *Hawwa*, adapted her knowledge to these changing times. Reading ‘between the lines’ of her grandmother’s cookbooks, school notes, recipes and old magazines, Serry recounts, she found ‘stories of the heavy expectations placed on women, modernist aspirations, and financial hardships. It made me think of how she sat budgeting every month’s groceries as the country’s economy went spiraling downhill, as it funded wars and unrealistic nation-building projects’.⁶⁵ In her grandmother’s archive of clipped recipes and handwritten notes, Serry reads the practices of reusing leftovers and making jam preserves not as a nostalgic attempt to return to an older, rural way of life, but rather a creative and necessary response to the expectations to feed one’s family well, even in the face of scarcity and uncertainty – to remain ‘flexible yet rooted’ in her role.⁶⁶

A prominent culture of modern domesticity and home economics had granted Egyptian women like Serry’s grandmother a form of sovereignty over the home. But how did Egypt’s home cooks respond to the influx of new products and technologies? How did they balance the convenience of canned *salsa* with their commitments to cooking everything themselves or remaining ‘rooted’ in the (often rural) culinary traditions of their grandmothers? Moving from the market to the kitchen, the following section discusses the strategies that urban home cooks adopted as a response to the state’s drastic, if uneven, transformations of the food system.

Kitchens as sites of ‘practical sovereignty’ and creative refusal

Just as the territory of Egypt changed with the damming of the Nile, the space of the urban middle-class home kitchen transformed over the course of the twentieth century. Both shifts were important to feeding the nation, but it was in the home kitchen that Egyptian women wielded their own form of sovereignty over ingredients and

appliances to produce *tasbika*. This ‘kitchen sovereignty’ resembles with what Berlant describes as a ‘personal or practical sovereignty’, characterised less by direct forms of resistance than by what they term ‘lateral agency’.⁶⁷ It entails a kind of activity that while not unconscious is more concerned with the immediacies of everyday nourishment than overtly counterhegemonic action or resistance: in Berlant’s words, ‘a relief, a reprieve, not a repair’.⁶⁸

Kitchen sovereignty, as expressed in the oral history narratives below, is a site for drawing on what you know and making do with the ingredients at hand – remaining, to quote Serry again, ‘flexible yet rooted’. This might entail using state-subsidised ingredients, but selectively, or cooking a recipe sanctioned by a state publication, but devising your own way of sourcing or processing the components. Sometimes it looks like narratively asserting the historical continuity of a dish and downplaying the ways it has been altered or modernised.

Perhaps because it is both variable and ubiquitous, *tasbika* emerges in oral history data as a key site of practical kitchen sovereignty. I draw on oral histories not to suggest that there was one consistent or even dominant approach to making *tasbika* as it emerged as a central Egyptian cooking technique, but rather to demonstrate that the evolution of the dish did not always proceed according to linear, state-led approaches to modernising the food system. The very inconsistencies that emerge from descriptions of how different women approached *tasbika* offer rich examples of how women creatively navigated state-approved products and norms. While cookbook authors and state publications often positioned themselves as arbiters of national taste, the history of *tasbika* highlights the limits of state power when it comes to creating the more viscerally affective *flavours* of home cooking.⁶⁹ In other words, conventional sovereignty may have enabled the production of *salsa*. But even for home cooks who readily adopted public sector-manufactured *salsa*, only kitchen sovereignty could produce *tasbika*.

It is worth sketching out some of the basic changes that took place for middle-class women and their home kitchens in Egypt during the transition between the final years of colonial rule and the first years of the Arab socialist regime founded in 1952. Examples from the women’s magazine *Bint al-Nil* illustrate how much the middle-class home kitchen changed due to industrialisation between 1947 and 1957 (roughly corresponding to the years of the magazine’s publication). A 1947 feature lists the kitchen items necessary for a modern housewife as: a single-burner kerosene stove, copper pots and pans and a copper strainer (*masfa*) – once the utensil of choice for grating tomatoes by hand into pulp for making *salsa*.⁷⁰ A decade later, the same magazine held a contest with a prize of a kitchen makeover courtesy of Ideal, the state-owned home goods manufacturer.⁷¹ It was Ideal that brought appliances like multiple-burner gas stoves and refrigerators within reach of the middle classes in the 1950s and 1960s.⁷² By the late 1950s, a full gas range and mass-produced aluminium pots had displaced the kerosene stove and copper pots as the hallmarks of the aspirational middle-class kitchen in Egypt. Subsequently the rise of Egyptian migration to Gulf states, where incomes were higher, offered opportunities for even more Egyptians to acquire kitchen appliances like deep freezers and blenders.⁷³ Equipped with these appliances, middle-class women had new tools at their disposal for preparing and preserving food – including *tasbika* and its constituent elements.

In Egypt, as elsewhere, the modern kitchen, equipped with the latest in domestic technologies, was promoted as a means to liberate women by saving them time and reducing the burden of domestic drudgery.⁷⁴ In the context of state feminism post-1952, it was part of an overall agenda aimed at ‘making the role of the working woman ... compatible with her role as wife and mother’.⁷⁵ Less time labouring spent at home would afford women more time to work outside of it. And yet Laura Bier points out that while Nasserist policies did increase women’s participation in the wage labour force compared to what they had been, women still only made up about 10 *per cent* of Egypt’s labour force by 1969.⁷⁶ Even so, she illustrates that the figure of the ‘working woman’ in Egypt was consequential beyond workforce participation statistics, emerging as a central figure of debates over the nature of the Egyptian public sphere and the terms of state-led development.⁷⁷ In the case of the home kitchen, the state’s emphasis on women’s workforce participation translated into the manufacturing and marketing of canned foods and time-saving kitchen devices that had real effects on women’s cooking – even for those who worked solely within domestic settings as housewives or paid domestic servants.

Women who *did* participate in the workforce were subjected to the pressures of the ‘second shift’, working outside the home while also providing or overseeing family meals.⁷⁸ Anisa al-Hifni, one of Egypt’s first women physicians, would go into work early, then return home ‘to have breakfast with my husband, so that he wouldn’t have to eat breakfast alone’ before returning to work for a full day – followed by dinner with her children at home.⁷⁹ Duriya Zaki, a university professor born in 1936, worked late hours, writing lectures at night in order to make time for both food preparation and the demands of her career. ‘I would get up very early and take care of everything so that when [my children] came home from school, all of their food would be ready and they could eat their dinner’, she recalled.⁸⁰

In the face of both new constraints and newly available consumer goods, it is no surprise that many women embraced canned *salsa*, which Amira Howeidly describes as ‘a cooking shortcut that suited the busy lives of modernized and industrialized Egyptians’.⁸¹ Its newly widespread availability was a key factor in making *tasbika* an element of daily cooking. Howeidly suggests that *salsa* has become such a staple that today ‘no truly Egyptian fridge or pantry’ lacks it.⁸² Skipping the process of grating or blending the enormous quantity of tomatoes *tasbika* requires by purchasing canned *salsa* is an enormous time saver. Even so, the particulars of how and when women incorporated items like canned foods reflects a selective engagement with the state’s promotion of those products. Numerous home cooks who used canned *salsa* year-round also recounted lists of other ingredients that they prepared *only* in season. We might read this balancing of fresh produce (green beans, okra or taro, for instance) and aseasonal canned *salsa* less as a wholesale adoption of the state’s promotion of canned foods than a selective negotiation: a compromise position that depends upon a canned version of one ingredient in order to present seasonal dishes throughout the year.

At the same time, many women I spoke to preferred to avoid using canned ingredients, even as they used new kitchen technologies (often those manufactured by nationalised companies) to make batches of *salsa* or clarify their own butter. In making their own *salsa*, women were not merely transforming their kitchens into mini food

processing plants: they also asserted a connection to their own rural maternal heritage as they did so, citing the way that their mothers and grandmothers had cooked.

Reem, born in 1967, explained the excellence of her grandmother's cooking by explaining that she never used canned tomatoes and obtained her *samna* (clarified butter) from a local, reliable source. '[My grandmother] used real tomato. Of course the smell was completely different', she told me.⁸³ Even though her grandmother juiced the tomatoes by hand and her mother used a blender, Reem asserted a basic continuity and quality in her family's *tasbika* through the generations because they always pureed their tomatoes at home, whatever the technology involved, and used other ingredients of trustworthy provenance rather than relying on industrially-processed versions.

Hanan, a woman of Reem's mother's generation, described how she made her own *salsa* in the context of a wider narrative about her upbringing. She explained that in the village where she spent her childhood, everything was produced on site. Their *samna* was made from the milk of a water buffalo her family owned. 'There was nothing from outside', she said, and as a result, everything had a superior aroma and taste in her recollection. According to her memories of that home, 'the food was all made *bi-tasbika*', and regardless of the inferiority of the ingredients now available to her, she insisted that she makes it exactly the same way that it was prepared for her in childhood.⁸⁴

Salsa played a key role in her narrative. Invoking the ethos she associated with the cooking of her childhood, she explained her method for making and preserving tomato puree from scratch, which she had learned not from her mother but from her sister, whose kitchen setup had more closely resembled her own.

I take off the skin and boil [the tomatoes] with only water. I put them on the butagaz [stove], add some salt, and then I put them in the blender. Then I put it in the freezer: that's *salsa*. You can get it at the supermarket. But I make it at home.

Excitedly leading me to her kitchen she opened her freezer, which was full of frozen bags of *salsa*. Hanan grew up learning to make *tasbika* in a village; when she first married, she grated her tomatoes by hand with a *masfa*; and later in life she prepared it for children and grandchildren in an urban kitchen equipped with an electric blender and freezer full of *salsa*. But to her, this was a story not of change but continuity: the fundamental aspects of her preparation rendered her *tasbika* consistent over time. Her refusal of canned tomato puree was not a matter of nostalgic intent to recreate the cooking of her childhood, step-by-step; it was an active adaptation of an inherited rural practice in response to the modernisation of the kitchen and the food system that supplied it.

The question of *tasbika*'s animal fat content was also frequently discussed by home cooks who emphasised the need to establish creative alternatives to depending on government-subsidised meat or cooking oil. Blaming the poor quality of meat and fats available, some families explained that they turned to informal networks to circumvent mainstream markets altogether. A cookbook Nicola wrote in the 1970s as part of a series affiliated with *Hawwa*' magazine cautioned that people with diabetes and other health conditions should avoid fat-heavy 'traditional' preparations of vegetables like okra.⁸⁵ And some women explained that their family recipes had indeed shifted along these lines to produce a much lighter version of *tasbika* with oil rather than butter and

a less dense and rich end product.⁸⁶ But more frequently it was explained to me that the true problem was less to do with using too much *samna* than it was with using the wrong *kind* of *samna* – specifically, not using *samna baladi*.

Samna baladi refers to butter clarified from local ('*baladi*') rather than imported butter, preferably prepared in small batches from the milk of a water buffalo. Magda, born in 1963, insisted: 'my mother has lived her whole life on *samna*. She has never had diabetes or high blood pressure ... *samna* is not the problem'.⁸⁷ The range of cooking fats that home cooks used in *tasbika* and other recipes reflects the way that the kitchen emerged as a sphere for women to exercise their own discretion, sometimes accepting and sometimes refusing the guidelines of health authorities or the products provided and subsidised by the state.

Many Egyptians described the difficulty of attaining quality ingredients as a symptom of a food system that failed to provide the same level of quality dairy, meat and produce compared with the past. They cited a range of reasons for this decline, many of them tied to reforms that expanded imports and liberalised the Egyptian economy: agricultural policies that maximised land for profit rather than traditional practices like grazing water buffalo, the use of pesticides and fertilisers, increasing reliance on imported foods and a food system that valued appearance and efficiency over nutrition or flavour.⁸⁸ Mustafa (born in 1948, the husband of a woman I interviewed) chimed in to say that as priorities in Egyptian society increasingly became distorted, those distortions were reflected in the inferiority of available ingredients. 'Tastes change', he said. 'Before, the food was rich in fat, even though money was scarce. Now there's [more] money. But there's no fat'.⁸⁹

Home cooks upheld their practices of finding and using 'good fat' in creative ways. Mustafa's family avoided state-subsidised food products whenever they could – for example, seeking out butchers that sold quality local or *baladi* meat for their stews. By invoking the adjective '*baladi*' in these discussions, Egyptians referred to foods that were locally produced rather than imported while simultaneously implying a level of quality, care and attention to practices they perceived as locally traditional or historically rooted in their production. Magda's mother continues to purchase large amounts of butter from the countryside and clarify it herself, as she has always done, before distributing to her extended family.⁹⁰ These examples demonstrate Egypt's urban home cooks as sovereign within the bounds of their domestic domains, often bypassing state-subsidised ingredients and systems on a selective basis in order to fashion their optimal version of a daily stew for their families. For many, this entails drawing on practical know-how passed down as family wisdom to assert a mode of everyday cooking that circumvents developments imposed by the state in the name of progress. In doing so, they were not necessarily dismissing or rejecting the broad project of modern nation-building in Egypt: many were deeply invested in explaining the key elements of 'traditional' or 'authentic' food in explicitly national terms. Nor were they necessarily rejecting the authority of the state or seeking to resist it entirely. Rather, they positioned themselves as important actors, and authorities, engaged in shaping the meaning of 'good' Egyptian food.

Conclusion

Over the course of a century, tomato sauce in Egypt emerged from its origins as an elite garnish to become the basis of an everyday cooking method synonymous with modern Egyptian flavour. While accounting for the influence of state strategies and policies on the nation's food supply, I have also presented the concept of 'kitchen sovereignty' to explain this transformation and account for how *tasbika* came to be plausibly described as the 'mother of all dishes' and a defining element of Egypt's national cuisine. The term *mother* is illustrative, as Egyptians frequently credited lines of maternal transmission of culinary knowledge in narratives about good food. In doing so, they downplayed the drastic shifts in cooking that state interventions prompted, emphasising instead the maintenance of tradition and continuity that underpinned their own contributions to building the nation.

Kitchen sovereignty reveals how women's home cooking was influenced by state policies yet not determined by them. The power that home cooks retain in defining the domestic sphere, despite political attempts to discipline or define it, feeds the strength of their narratives about food – narratives that highlight the continuity of a culinary tradition transmitted through maternal lines, despite the dramatic changes that state policies have wrought upon *tasbika*'s preparation over time. Even as the state developed a food system increasingly integrated with global markets and insulated from local and seasonal ways of eating, home cooks remade their own relationships, in narrative and material ways, to the Egyptian countryside where many of their families – and recipes – originated. Exploring how their exercise of kitchen sovereignty collectively created one of Egypt's most ubiquitous cooking techniques offers insight into the messy processes by which state power defined national communities – and the ways that women's work and the vibrancy of living food cultures continue to shape and illuminate the limits of that power.

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Notes

1. Where necessary, I have changed the names of individuals I interviewed to protect anonymity.

2. First remark from an audience member at a talk given at the American Research Center in Egypt on 26 October 2016; second from interview conducted by author, 5 October 2016.
3. Mennat-Allah El Dorry, 'Forbidden, Sprouted, Stewed: An Archeobotanical and Historical Overview of Fava Beans in Ancient Egypt', in Mennat-Allah El Dorry (ed.), *Feeding a Civilisation: Food and Drink in Egypt and Sudan* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, forthcoming); Hala Barakat, 'We Are What We Eat, We Were What We Ate', in Iman Hamdi and Malak Rouchdy (eds), *The Food Question in the Middle East* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2017).
4. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 18, 96.
5. Jeffrey M Pilcher, *¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), p. 2.
6. The noun *tasbika* and the related passive participle *musabbak* (which is used to refer to a dish that has been prepared in this fashion) are by no means the only way to refer to tomato stewing and saucing techniques of this kind. *Dim'a* is another Egyptian word that refers to a rich tomato sauce, and in everyday parlance, it is most common for a dish that is stewed in tomato sauce to be referred to by its primary vegetable ingredient (okra, green beans, etc.), with the above technique simply implied, rather than overtly stated. *Tasbika* as a term is far more commonly invoked in spoken Egyptian Arabic than in written standard Arabic, and my adoption of it in part reflects my deliberate privileging of the vernacular sources at the core of my understanding of it. In other words, I have settled on the term *tasbika* for the sake of convenience – not as an argument for using the term over others, nor in an attempt to codify it in an empirical sense. For an example of an ethnographic description of the use of *tasbika* to prepare okra, see Nefissa Naguib, *Nurturing Masculinities: Men, Food, and Family in Contemporary Egypt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), p. 111.
7. I thank Malak Rouchdy for encouraging me to think in terms of descriptions of technique rather than searching for specific lexical items as I began researching the history of tomato sauce in Egypt.
8. Rachel Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), ch. 7.
9. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 133.
10. Of course, not all home cooks are women, and men and boys also contribute to home cooking in other significant ways, from shopping for ingredients to expressing preferences and opinions. A handful of men's voices are cited here to reflect this. However, the focus of this article is chiefly on the voices of women and their kitchen memories and practices. For more on the role of men and boys in Egyptian kitchens, see Naguib, *Nurturing Masculinities*, and Farha Ghannam, *Live and Die Like a Man: Gender Dynamics in Urban Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).
11. Anny Gaul, 'From Kitchen Arabic to Recipes for Good Taste: Nation, Empire, and Race in Egyptian Cookbooks', *Global Food History* 8 (2022), pp. 4–33.
12. Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 4–5, 10–12.
13. I am indebted to Antonio Tahhan for illuminating discussions about foods like *tasbika* that persist largely in oral or embodied form; by their nature such techniques afford greater openness to flexibility, adaptation and possibility than written recipes, which require privileging certain versions or elements of a dish to produce or propose a stable version of it.
14. *Hawwa* and *al-Musawwar* are both published by Dar al-Hilal publishing house, which has been state-owned since 1960.
15. Duriya Shafik, founder of *Bint al-Nil*, was an outspoken opponent of Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime. Her magazine was shuttered when she was placed under house arrest in 1957. Amina Sa'id, founding editor of *Hawwa*, on the other hand, took an editorial line in support of the revolution and of Nasser's regime. Cynthia Nelson, 'Biography and Women's History: On Interpreting Doria Shafik', in Nikkie R. Keddie and Beth Baron (eds), *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 312–26; Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 203; Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 20.
16. The women I interviewed were born between 1940 and 1970; I typically include an interviewee's year of birth to offer an approximation of her generation. For this article, I based my observations and conclusions on ten oral history interviews I conducted personally and eleven oral histories transcribed and published by the organisations mentioned here. Of these twenty-one interviews, I cite eleven directly here. My primary oral history subjects included eight Muslim women and two Coptic Christian women; all have lived the majority or all of their lives in Cairo or Alexandria, Egypt's two major cities.

17. For example, subjects range from the daughter of an elite family who grew up in a wealthy multigenerational household moved into a smaller, middle-class apartment as a teenager, to women who grew up working-class but worked careers outside the home to ensure a middle-class upbringing for their children (private schools, university educations, white-collar jobs). As a result, some of them recall cooking on gas stoves or using refrigerators from childhood while others explain that they acquired such appliances upon or after marriage. As a result, my interviews do not represent the experiences of rural Egyptians or lower-income urban Egyptians; they skew towards the middle and upper strata of the middle classes. For studies that reflect everyday life, including food practices, of working-class and lower-income Cairenes, see Naguib, *Nurturing Masculinities*, and Farha Ghannam, *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
18. Although they are beyond the scope of this article, more recent media sources such as cooking shows on Egyptian television and social media sites like YouTube represent a trove of additional source material about *tasbika* and a promising source for future research. For a discussion of Egyptian cooking shows since 2000, see Malak Rouchdy, 'Food Recipes and Kitchen Space: Constructing Social Identities and New Frontiers', in Maha Abdelrahman et al. (eds), *Cultural Dynamics in Contemporary Egypt, Vol. 27, Cairo Papers in Social Science* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006), pp. 121–42.
19. The tomato is listed by its Latin and Arabic names in a list of Egyptian flora written by one of the scholars who accompanied Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798. Alire Raffeneau Delile, 'Florae Aegyptiacae illustratio', in E. F. Jomard (ed.), *Histoire Naturelle*, vol. 2, *Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1813), p. 56.
20. Yusuf ibn Muhammad Shirbini, *Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abu Shaduf Expounded*, tr. Humphrey Davies, vol. 1 (New York: New York University Press, 2016), pp. 366–7. I am grateful to Humphrey Davies for bringing this reference to my attention. The reason I qualify this instance as circumstantial is that the word used to refer to the tomato in the poem, *qūṭa*, was also historically used in Egyptian Arabic to refer to another edible nightshade, *Solanum aethiopicum*, which unlike the tomato was indigenous to Africa. Additionally, the author of the work mentions tomatoes only once, in passing, in a volume that is otherwise full of detailed descriptions of foods and dishes typical to the Egyptian countryside – suggesting that even if tomatoes were known in Egypt in the late seventeenth century, they were likely not a particularly common food. For a discussion of food in Shirbini's work, see Sami Zubaida, 'Hazz al-Quhuf: An Urban Satire on Peasant Life and Food from Seventeenth-Century Egypt', in Nuno Domingos, José Manuel Sobral and Harry G. West (eds), *Food Between the Country and the City: Ethnographies of a Changing Global Foodscape* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 161–73.
21. For Ottoman influence in Egyptian cuisine, see Sami Zubaida, 'A Culinary History of "National" Cuisine: Egypt and the Middle East', in Maha Abdelrahman et al. (eds), *Cultural Dynamics in Contemporary Egypt, Vol. 27, Cairo Papers in Social Science* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006), pp. 143–55, here p. 153. I am grateful to Hala Barakat for advising me to focus on the connection between Ottoman and Egyptian foodways when investigating the history of the tomato in Egypt.
22. Tülay Artan, 'Aspects of the Ottoman Elite's Food Consumption: Looking for "Staples", "Luxuries", and "Delicacies" in a Changing Century', in Donald Quataert (ed.), *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550–1922: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 107–65, here pp. 112–14. See fn. 31, p. 183 for an extended discussion of this cookbook and the role of tomatoes in it.
23. Muhammad Afandi Sidqi (tr.), *Malja'a al-tabbākhīn* (Cairo: Matba' al-Shaykh Abu al-'Aynayn, 1878). I thank Salma Serry for generously sharing the details of this early edition of Sidqi's book with me. The book was reprinted numerous times, including at least as late as 1915.
24. For example, a 1930 agricultural manual explains that 'the cultivation of tomatoes in Egypt it still limited', and notes that demand for local consumption is so low that should farmers dedicate more land to growing them, 'prices would fall to a level that would not even equal the cost of transporting them to market'. Muhammad Bayumi 'Ali, Muhammad 'Abd al-Badi' and Mustafa Surur, *al-Khuḍrawāt fī Maṣr* (Cairo: Matba' at al-Muqtataf wa-l-Muqattam, 1930).
25. Thora Stowell, *The Anglo-Egyptian Cookery Book* (Alexandria: Whitehead Morris, 1923), pp. 38–42.
26. Stowell, *Anglo-Egyptian Cookery*, pp. 169–70.
27. United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, 'Crops and Livestock Products', FAOSTAT: Food and Agriculture Data, accessed 28 June 2022, <https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#home>.
28. United Nations FAO, 'Crops and Livestock Products', FAOSTAT, accessed 13 July 2022. FAO data begin in 1961.

29. F. Nigel Hepper, *Flora of Egypt No. 6, Family 159: Solanaceae* (Cairo: Cairo University Herbarium, 1998), p. 58.
30. Hepper, *Flora of Egypt*, p. 58.
31. Rouchdy, 'Food Recipes and Kitchen Space', p. 132. See also p. 136.
32. Interview conducted by author, 1 November 2016.
33. Interview conducted by author, 21 October 2016.
34. Interview conducted by author, 21 October 2016.
35. Interview conducted by author, 16 June 2015.
36. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army, and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Aaron Jakes, *Egypt's Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Jennifer Derr, *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).
37. Construction on the first modern Nile dam was completed in 1902. Derr, *Lived Nile*, p. 45.
38. Habiba Hassan-Wassef, 'Food Habits of the Egyptians: Newly Emerging Trends', *La Revue de Santé de La Méditerranée Orientale* 10 (2004), pp. 898–915, here p. 902. See also 'Ali Hassan, 'Nutritional Problems of Egypt', in *A Brief Review of Food and Nutrition in Five Countries: Five Lectures by Delegates to the United Nations Food Office* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1944), pp. 6–10.
39. Basima Zaki Ibrahim, *al-Ghidhā' wa-l-maṭbakh wa-l-mā'ida: al-Maṭbakh al-Sharqī*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Wadi 'Abu Fadil, 1940), pp. 61–62; Nazira Nicola and Bahiya 'Uthman, *Uṣūl al-ṭahī: al-naẓarī wa-l-'amalī* (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Umumiyya, 1953), pp. 100–101. The first edition of Nicola and 'Uthman's book was published in 1941.
40. Esmat Rushdi, 'Domestic Science in Egypt', *Bulletin of the Egypt Education Bureau*, 1948, pp. 9–10, here p. 10.
41. Based on a sample consisting of the following issues: April, June and August 1946, December 1947, January and August 1948, May 1949, February and October 1950, January 1951, April and November 1953, June 1954, and November 1955. Cauliflower appears from November to April, cucumber June through October, taro November through February, and spinach December through April.
42. Ahmad Shokr, 'Hydropolitics, Economy, and the Aswan High Dam in Mid-Century Egypt', *The Arab Studies Journal* 17 (2009), pp. 9–31, here p. 11.
43. Shokr, 'Hydropolitics', p. 11.
44. 'Abd al-Wahhab Muhammad, 'Hawwalna majra al-Nil', 1965. Translation by author.
45. Muhammad, 'Hawwalna', emphasis added.
46. Ray Bush, 'Crisis in Egypt: Structural Adjustment, Food Security and the Politics of USAID', *Capital & Class* 18 (1994), pp. 15–37, here p. 19.
47. Pural cookware advertisement, *al-Muṣawwar*, 22 May 1964, p. 23; Sharikat Iskandariya li-l-mantūjāt al-madīniyya, *al-Muṣawwar*, 22 May 1964, p. 57.
48. For more on the 'working woman' during this period, see Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, ch. 2.
49. Anny Gaul, 'Food, Happiness, and the Egyptian Kitchen (1900–1952)', in Kirill Dmitriev, Julia Hauser and Bilal Orfali (eds), *Insatiable Appetite: Food as a Cultural Signifier* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 121–41.
50. Nazira Nicola, *Aṭḥāq sarī'a wa-l-iqtisādiyya wa-aṣnāf khāṣṣa bi-l-mar'a al-'āmila wa maraḍ al-sukkar* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, c.1973).
51. Qaha advertisement, *al-Muṣawwar*, 24 February 1956, p. 51.
52. Qaha advertisement, *Hawwā'*, 21 March 1959, p. 11.
53. See, for example, 'Ḥamra yā qūta ... sirr laqab 'al-majnūna' 'alā al-ṭamāṭim', *El Balad News*, 10 March 2020, <https://www.elbalad.news/4208855>, in which the dean of the Agriculture College at Egypt's Ain Shams University cites the tomato's extreme susceptibility to rot and the difficulties of transporting it long distances as a key reason behind its 'crazy' epithet.
54. The earliest reference I have found to this street cry is an account of the governmental transition in the wake of the 1952 coup, when army officers demanded that the Ministry of Supply fix the price of tomatoes to protect Egyptians from 'the greed of merchants'. Nourhan Mustafa, 'Qīṣṣat wazīr tamwīn qadam istiqlālatahu bi-sabab al-ṭamāṭim: "majnūna ya qūta"', *al-Masry al-Yaum Lite*, 1 December 2016, <https://lite.almazryalyoum.com/extra/122303/>.
55. Tessa Farmer, 'The Humble Tomato', *Middle East Report*, 16 January 2015, <https://www.merip.org/humble-tomato>.
56. Qaha advertisement, *Hawwā'*, 21 March 1959, p. 11.

57. Rafik Baladi Oral History, courtesy of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library, the American University in Cairo.
58. Sara Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 164.
59. Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives*, p. 164.
60. Interview with Mona Abaza, conducted by author, 14 October 2017.
61. Timothy Mitchell, 'America's Egypt', *Middle East Report* no. 169 (1991), <https://merip.org/1991/03/americas-egypt/>.
62. Bush, 'Crisis in Egypt', p. 20.
63. Mitchell, 'America's Egypt'; Bush, 'Crisis in Egypt'.
64. 'al-Ṭamāṭim laysat waḥdahā al-majnūna!', *al-Muṣawwar*, 9 May 1975, n.p.
65. Salma Serry, 'Teita's Bitter Orange Jam', *ArabLit Quarterly*, Summer 2021, pp. 18–39, here pp. 32–3.
66. Serry, 'Teita', p. 30.
67. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, pp. 18, 96. Describing agency as 'lateral' also suggests that it is not oriented directly as an act of resistance to a source of power but rather in a different direction – such as the kitchen, where making dinner is an act that grapples with and responds to state subsidies and elite norms but does not overtly confront them.
68. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 117.
69. For a brief discussion about taste versus flavour, see Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), p. 191.
70. 'Athāth al-maṭbakh', *Bint al-Nīl*, 10 January 1947, p. 44.
71. 'al-Fā'iza bi-hadiyat Bint al-Nīl "Maṭbakh Ideal" tatasallam hadiyatihā', *Bint al-Nīl*, February 1957, p. 17. See Mona Abaza, *Changing Consumer Cultures of Modern Egypt: Cairo's Urban Reshaping* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 90–93, for a discussion of the history of the nationalised Ideal company as 'the regime's symbol of success', p. 91.
72. Although electric blenders were advertised as early as 1964, they did not become as widely available as stoves and refrigerators until the 1970s and 1980s.
73. Galal Amin, *Mādhā ḥadatha li-l-Maṣriyyīn?*, pp. 107–08. Amin notes that while Egyptian migration to Gulf countries began in the 1960s, there was an important shift in the mid-1970s after which not only highly educated, but also working-class Egyptians began to migrate in significant numbers, thereby expanding the number of Egyptians with access to goods previously associated with elite or middle-class lifestyles.
74. Of course, it did not always achieve these aims. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
75. United Arab Republic, *al-Mar'a fī al-jumhūriyya al-'arabiyya al-muttaḥida*, p. 35 qtd. in Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, p. 65.
76. Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, p. 68.
77. Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, pp. 68–70.
78. Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin, 1987).
79. 'Anisa al-Hifni', in Amal Abu al-Fadil (ed.), *Aṣwāt wa-aṣdā'* (Cairo: Women and Memory Forum, 2007), pp. 7–25, here pp. 19–20.
80. 'Duriya Zaki', in *Aṣwāt wa-aṣdā'*, pp. 39–40.
81. Amira Howeid, 'Cooking Taro: Egypt's Famous Epiphany Dish', *Ahram Online*, 19 January 2021, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1208/399179/AIAhram-Weekly/Features/Cooking-taro-Egypt-famous-Epiphany-dish.aspx>.
82. Howeid, 'Cooking Taro'.
83. Interview conducted by author, 18 November 2016.
84. Interview conducted by author, 21 October 2016.
85. Nila, *Aṭbāq sarī'a*, p. 205.
86. For a discussion of a more recent (early 2000s) cookbook emphasising shifts to versions of Egyptian dishes with less fat than 'traditional' preparations, see Rouchdy, 'Food Recipes and Kitchen Space', pp. 129–30.
87. Interview conducted by author, 5 October 2016.
88. Many of these reforms originated with Sadat's 'open door policy' of economic liberalisation beginning in the 1970s, although some had even earlier roots. The damming of the Nile required significant amounts of imported fertiliser to make up for the lack of silt deposits that had once come with the river's yearly floods. And Egyptian reliance on foreign food aid began to increase in the 1960s, before Sadat came to power. Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives*, p. 164.
89. Interview conducted by author, 28 March 2017.

90. There is an important distinction between the practices described here and the rise of Western-style farmer's markets in upscale neighbourhoods as an 'alternative' lifestyle choice. What I describe here are largely informal networks navigated through personal connections and family ties, rather than the emergence of a new market space or consumer trend. Another key site for investigating these practices, though beyond the scope of my own research, are Coptic Egyptians' connections to rural monasteries and other communities as sources of produce for city dwellers. For a discussion of similar dynamics in Turkey, see Candan Turkkan, 'What is the "Alternative"? Insights from Istanbul's Food Networks', *Food, Culture & Society* (2021), pp. 1–21.

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