Transcript of *What'sHerName* Episode 101: THE QUEEN OF CHOCOLATE Luisa Spagnoli

[00:00] **Olivia Meikle:** Hi Katie.

Katie Nelson: Hi, Olivia.

OM: Now, I know that you love food history...

KN: Oh, **do I!**

OM: I do too. It's the greatest. And I don't know about you, but I have usually found that the history that tends to, like, *totally blow my mind* the most, usually ends up being food history. The things where it's like, "I have never given a single thought to this thing, but it turns out it's maybe one of the most important things that ever happened in a thousand years." Like those always end up being food history for me.

KN: Well, you are setting my expectations quite high, I must say.

OM: Good, they should be. [laughter] So I first met today's subject, Luisa Spagnoli, in a new book called *Feeding Fascism* by Diana Garvin -

KN: Oh!

OM: which is a mind-blowingly fascinating dive into the history of food culture in Mussolini's Italy.

KN: Fascinating. Yes. I had never thought of that.

OM: Yeah, it had not ever crossed my mind, and it turns out - one of the most important things ever.

KN: Well, if there's a place that is, like, iconic for food culture, it's Italy.

OM: And how did that happen? *Dun dun dun*...

KN: What? No!

OM: Spoilers: Mussolini.

KN: What?!

OM: Patience, we'll get there.

KN: Oh, ooh. Okay.

OM: Our subject today, Luisa Spagnoli, would rise from poverty and obscurity to become one of the most famous chocolatiers in history. Her company, Perugina, is a household name in Italy and across Europe.

KN: Oh, whoa.

OM: Her trademark product, the Baci, the Kiss, is still an icon of Italian chocolate. And she was also a famed fashion designer whose label is still a major fashion powerhouse. And she did all of that under one of the most misogynistic, male-dominated regimes in recent history.

KN: Okay. So Mussolini's Italy, chocolate, and …fashion?

OM: and fashion.

KN: Okay.

OM: In a regime pretty single-mindedly dedicated to keeping women in their place.

KN: Okay. But how?

OM: But howwwww?

KN: How did she do that?

[theme music]

OM: I'm Olivia Meikle.

KN: and I'm Katie Nelson.

OM: and this is *What'sHerName.*

KN: Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[theme music]

OM: So to answer that question, I spoke with Diana Garvin herself.

Diana Garvin: My name is Diana Garvin, and I'm an assistant professor of Italian with a specialty in Mediterranean Studies at the University of Oregon. I use food to study politics and power in fascist Italy.

OM: And her book *Feeding Fascism* is jam-packed with exactly those kind of tiny, explosive, paradigm shifting bits of information I was just talking about.

KN: Wow.

OM: From how shifts in household labor during this period ended up transforming architecture, to questions around childbirth and childcare that expand on a lot of the conversations we had in our episode on Lois Meek Stoltz - to fundamental questions like, 'What is a cultural identity and how is it formed?'

KN: Oh, I love those kind of questions.

OM: Yeah. So I could not recommend this book any more highly. Everyone I know has been getting novels via text from me as I've been live-tweeting my way through the experience of reading this book.

KN: You know, I'm already like doing the math. I'm thinking, what do I know about Italian food culture? And it's your classic Italian grandmother making sauce for 10 hours in the kitchen, right? But if I do the math, I'm like, "Where are these Italian grandmothers coming from? Oh wait…"

OM: **Oh wait.**

KN: They would have been raised in Mussolini's Italy.

OM: Hmm.

KN: Am I right? [laughter] Wow. Let's do it!

05:00-10:00

Diana Garvin: I first met Luisa Spagnoli via a photograph in a gastronomic library. It's actually the Academia Barilla. So Barilla has a library just for food history research, and I came across a photo that was pretty uncommon for the time. It showed the woman behind the wheel of an enormous automobile. She was wearing sort of like a cloche hat on her head. She was grinning, leaning forward. She looked totally in control of where this car is going. And from the vantage point of somebody reading the magazine, it looked like she was driving that car straight out of the photo and into your kitchen.

Next to her was a younger man who looked like a pouty Frank Sinatra. He had a cap on his head set, slightly askew, the most elegantly disheveled raincoat, and he's slightly leaning towards her in the passenger seat of the car. And from that moment, I was dying to know who this woman was. It turned out that she was responsible for a chocolate treat that I had been eating earlier that day, the little blue Italian Baci. And later on that week, I discovered walking down the street, she wasn't just behind the chocolate, she was also behind some of my favorite fashion. So, walking down the street, wearing a Luisa Spagnoli angora sweater, nibbling some of the chocolates, I was dying to know how a woman had put together an empire during the heart of the fascist years. When the regime was bent on removing women

from the public sphere, how had Luisa Spagnoli managed to build an entrepreneurial empire?

OM: But in order to understand the life of Luisa Spagnoli at all, we first have to understand what was happening in Italy at this point. The between-the-wars era of Mussolini's rise. And this is also, frankly, a part of European history that does not get nearly as much attention as I feel like it should. And even in times when our culture has been hyper-focused on World War II, you could imagine Italy didn't exist in 90% of those conversations.

KN: Absolutely. It gets overshadowed by Nazi Germany in every story, because in hindsight, we know Nazi Germany's gonna turn out to be a really big deal. And *"oh yeah, Italy kind of sided with them carry on."*

OM: Yeah. And Mussolini, [sarcastically] 'you know, he was like his *sidekick*.' But there's actually a lot of really interesting and really important things going on, *astonishingly* [laughter] in this 40 year period of history that *perhaps* we should pay more attention to.

KN: Imagine that. [laughs]

Diana Garvin: So here are some of the things that I think you need to know about Italian fascism to understand what Luisa Spagnoli was up against: Benito Mussolini rose to power in 1922 with the March on Rome. And contrary to popular belief, he actually did not take power in a coup. Instead, the ascendance of fascism was decided on by a group of corporate titans. So on the night of October 26th, 1922, at the Hotel Brufani, this group of what were to become the future leaders of fascism met. So these industrial titans declared the official start of fascist rule. Even before the Black Shirts, those followers of Mussolini had reached Rome.

Some of the key ideas for the regime were based on strong man politics: the idea that Italy should be ascendant through an insular economy- so no trade going in or out. It's going to be pushing domestic products. The economy's really going to be based on corporatism.

OM: Luisa Spagnoli came from basically nothing in the time honored tradition of great entrepreneurs. She grew up extremely poor. She started working as a dressmaker's assistant when she was extremely young.

Diana Garvin: She started work so young that she would sneak ribbons and scraps of fabric home to play with as toys.

KN: Aw.

10:00-15:00

Diana Garvin: She met her husband Annibale Spagnoli when he came to Perugina to play with the town band. And it was with her sewing savings that they purchased a small drug store that has a candy-making capacity, and she starts to make chocolates by hand.

OM: She must have been pretty good at it, because they become very popular. And out of this tiny one woman chocolatierery- is that a word? Chocolatierery. [laughter] She will build an international chocolate and fashion empire.

KN: Okay!

OM: Now, the things that Luisa accomplished would be remarkable in any time and place for anyone, but they're especially remarkable as a woman in this time and place. As Mussolini's fascist party gains control, there are a few specific policies that he puts into action that would make it seem nearly impossible for a woman to become this kind of entrepreneuring, corporate empire building superstar.

KN: Okay.

Diana Garvin: First, let me explain what autarky means. Because this is one of the rare vocab words that kind of matters for understanding the chocolate trades. Autarky is basically 'made in Italy' on steroids. It means that the regime is really trying to push domestic production into hyperdrive.

OM: 'Traditional Italian ways are the best ways.' Even though the ways he's pushing are neither particularly traditional or particularly Italian, in many cases…

KN: Hey, classic!

OM: but the marketing campaign is full force.

KN: Okay. Because he says things like 'We were once Rome. And we can be it again!"

Diana Garvin: It affects everything from chemicals to mining to most definitely the food industry.

OM: Another major push of this regime is putting women *back in their place*, specifically in the home. This is an Italian version of the 'Angel in the Home' rhetoric popular in Victorian England, and at various times and places around… With a particularly funny bent here, in that, while the narrative says 'women should be in the home, they are the center of the home raising children, doing these womanly things' has to compete with the economic reality that at least two-thirds of women are working.

KN: Interesting.

Diana Garvin: And during this period, food industry, most employees were women. Like the textile industry, this is one of those industries that has long had more female workers. They were considered to be more compliant - and, under fascism, because of what was called the Serpieri Coefficient, they were allowed to be paid at a rate of two-thirds of man's salary.

OM: But again, no good leader ever lets pesky facts get in the way of a narrative. [laughter] And this pro-natalism…

KN: Pro-natalism? Like… make a lot of babies?

OM: Yes, make as many babies as you possibly can, because it is *the correct thing to do.* And because we owe the world more Italian babies.

KN: More Italian babies. I love it.

OM: We are the ideal, and therefore we should flood the earth with ***us***. (But, also… we need a lot of babies to grow up to be soldiers, because probably we're gonna have to have a lot of military encounters, and probably we need more men.)

KN: Yeah. Okay. I have a friend from Ukraine whose grandmother was given an award by Stalin for the same thing, because she had had so many babies, she got this medal from Stalin.

OM: Funny you should mention it…

KN: Oh!

OM: If you had at least six children, you could call yourself a 'prolific mother.'

KN: Yes.

OM: and you got an award, and you got a whole thing...

15:00- 20:00

Diana Garvin: I have seen photos of, you would not think it's biologically possible, up to like 18 children.

OM: I know for both of us, who barely came out of some childbirth experiences alive, that seems uniquely terrifying.

KN: I don't know where, what happened to our genes, because our great-grandma had thirteen kids. Something went wrong in the gene pool there.

Diana Garvin: And women would get prizes for being prolific mothers. You could move up the waitlist to get apartments in public housing projects. So all of these different fascist goals from autarky (again, that really intense version of 'made in Italy') to pronatalism (*more and better Italians*) - all these things come together to produce, in Benito Mussolini's eyes, a newer, more mighty Italy.

OM: And Luisa Spagnoli ends up, at least on the surface, fully embracing these particular policies of the fascist government, and enacting them in her own company. And even, in some cases, innovating *new* policies that will later be adopted and expanded by the government based on her own early ideas.

KN: Okay, I'm hanging on tight to that caveat that you said. 'At least on the surface,' …I like it.

OM: She looks *at first glance* like a good little fascist business owner.

KN: Lovely!

OM: But scratch the surface again, and there's absolutely no real evidence - that Diana Garvin has found, at least - that she held fascist beliefs, or any beliefs at all. It seems to be a *really amazing coincidence* that all of the fascist policies she does adopt *just happen* to be the ones that also benefit her company's bottom line.

KN: How about that?

OM: Crazy random happenstance. [laughter]

Diana Garvin: So above all things, she is a capitalist. And she's practical. She's an entrepreneur through and through.

OM: For example, Luisa Spagnoli very early on installs daycare centers and breastfeeding rooms in her factories.

KN: Really?

OM: These seem, upfront, like extremely progressive, really forward-thinking policies. I mean, we're still fighting for these things now.

KN: This is in what? The thirties?

OM: This is in the twenties!

KN: Dang! Okay.

Diana Garvin: But the problem is that the **intent** of the policies is very regressive. It's to get as many hours out of each employee as humanly possible. And it, in effect, makes the company one of the first of these 'total companies' - where the worker's entire private life becomes subsumed to Perugina, which becomes almost like its own factory village.

OM: To me, the echoes of some certain specific famous modern tech companies where the culture is famously, 'It's so fun here, you *never need to go home!* And we have pool tables

and trampolines and omelet bars at work!' And both of those really seem to be saying, at the core, you *never **get** to go home.*

Diana Garvin: And in fact, later fascism will adopt a lot of these ideas - putting breastfeeding rooms in factories, creating summer camps for children - and they'll do it because it provides an enormous degree of surveillance. So they will later do these things with eugenic aims in mind.

OM: The fascist narrative says, 'These things are important because we want to not just make Italian babies, we want to make *bigger, better Italian babies.'* And that involves turning lactation into an extremely scientific, clockwork exercise.

KN: Huh?

Diana Garvin: They actually believed that you could breastfeed according to a clock, and that you could control the exact amount of breastmilk that an infant would consume. Mothers were supposed to weigh the infant, breastfeed, weigh the infant again - to determine the exact amount of breast milk consumed. And it's actually a practice that women, including some Italian pediatricians I've talked to, still do today, because the fascist-period origins of this and, you know, really the eugenic roots, were forgotten. And now it's just part of this medicalized maternal practice that everyone does *because everyone does*.

20:00- 25:00

OM: All of this ties right into the hyper-surveillance state of fascist Italy. The government wants to quantify and measure everything, every moment of people's lives.

Diana Garvin: Anytime you quantify something, you cast this kind of rationalist halo over it. But the problem is you can count anything. I like some of the certainty of numbers. But the problem is - they can be just as biased as text.

OM (to Diana): Yeah. You're still *choosing what numbers to count*. You're still… you're always at a 'standpoint.'

Diana Garvin: Yeah, exactly. There is, I mean, there is a 'narrative voice' to numbers too.

OM (to Katie): Under what I think is the mistaken illusion, but common illusion, that by measuring things, you can control them.

KN: Sure.

OM: You can measure anything you want. It doesn't make that thing any more real than it already was, and it doesn't give you any more control over that thing than you already had. But they were convinced it did. And this control extends out into things that now seem hilarious. And it's easy to laugh at 'bigger, better Italian babies,' but, like - this is eugenics, and they are 'making better people.'

KN: Yeah, and that is always so interesting because you can see - in hindsight you can see how autocratic it is, but you can also see how it came from a place of good intention.

OM: Lots of the stated goals - hygiene, improved hygiene in the cities. Yes. Wonderful. I am all on board for that. But. And. I am **not** on board for how you are choosing to go about implementing that, right?

KN: Mm-hmm.

OM: But we are creating Ideal Italian Babies, to become Ideal Italian Soldiers.

[Ad break. Ad varies depending on listening service]

OM: Now you mentioned - I think we all have a pretty good stereotype in our mind if I say 'Italian mama.'.

KN: Oh, absolutely.

OM: An Italian mama is strong, powerful, hefty…

KN: She's beating people out of the kitchen with a wooden spoon so she can make her sauce.

OM: and her only focuses in life are **food** - specifically *sauce*, right? Like: food, homemade, wholesome, *special real Italian* food - and **babies**.

KN: Yeah.

OM: That is almost a carbon copy of the specific pattern that this regime lays out for *how women should be.*

KN: Well, how about that? [laughter]

Diana Garvin: The fascist regime itself invented a bunch of new holidays during this period. Mother's Day was actually one of them. Originally, the Italian version was on December 24th, so to coincide with Mother Mary's labor pains. It's one of the founding myths of fascism, the idea that there's this idealized national past, that only the regime can resurrect. Part of the way it does it is by inventing newborn traditions.

OM: The state looks at this, like, super-successful use of these rooms, of these lactation rooms and these daycares, which she can cast as patriotic.

KN: Sure.

25:00- 30:00

OM: And they start mandating these types of offerings nationwide in every workplace. She has lots of other, perhaps misleadingly, progressive-looking policies. Like medical care for all of her workers, including visits to sanitarium colonies if you need it. And these are also available to workers' children and husbands. They guarantee dowries for single women workers, and pensions - not just for the women workers, but for their *husbands*.

KN: Wow.

OM: She offers - I wanna call them corporate retreats - for all of her employees and their entire families.

Diana Garvin: So, It's a forerunner of what were basically fascist summer camps. The most common ones are either in the mountains or by the seaside. And Perugina had both, but the seaside ones were particularly popular. It was basically a few weeks, usually in August, when employees and also their children would just get some time off. But of course, because it's controlled by the company, it's not *truly* time off. In fact, the day is regimented almost as much as it is in the factory - where there is a certain time breakfast is served. Everyone stays in the same hotel that's been entirely rented out. Everyone plays games on the beach together, and they're actually -

OM (to Diana): So it's a team-building retreat.

Diana Garvin: [laughs] It's a team-building retreat, basically. And fascism later adopts many of these ideas. On one hand for building bigger, better, healthier children. You know, 'stick them in the sunlight, let them run around for a while,' especially if you're talking about the children of factory workers. But it's also a very neat way of keeping your factory workers occupied, so that they don't go down to the local osteria, drink some wine, and start talking about socialism. [laughter]

OM (to Katie): And so these things seem a little creepy to me. I hate corporate team building retreats - but everyone who worked for her loved her.

KN: In my mind, I'm connecting it to the summer camps in Mrs Maisel - regimented in this schedule, everybody is just participating happily in this regimented world, and it's all part of the fun.

OM: That's true. Yeah.

KN: Maybe part of the appeal is you don't have to think, you just go and do.

OM: It's decided what you're gonna do.

KN: I mean, it's not unlike commercial coach tours of Europe today, you know?

OM: Or all-inclusive resorts.

KN: It's fully regimented. You don't have to think. You just do what they tell you to do and go where they tell you to go. People love it.

OM: Yep. Some people… [laughter] She must have been an absolutely incredibly charismatic woman

Diana Garvin: She was utterly beloved by her employees. I have yet to find an account that shows anything other than great loyalty from an employee and great pleasure and pride at having worked there. Women loved having her as boss.

OM: And now obviously she knows as she's launching this company, that the government is going to be extremely skeptical of a woman-owned company of any kind.

KN: Sure.

OM: Fascism *always* comes hand in hand with misogyny. So making a public show of support for the regime's policies - *not necessarily* the regime's values - is gonna be very helpful to her. She understands very early on what is going to be the fundamental problem for her product here, which is that chocolate is still very much a luxury item at this point, and luxury items are not allowed in Mussolini's Italy.

KN: Oh.

OM: At least for the masses, right? *Luxury is decadence and there shall be none of it here.* The entire core of her company is built around a luxury product. How does she convince the regime that she should be allowed to carry on?

KN: Chocolate for the masses!

30:00- 35:00

OM: Yes. One brilliant move she makes is leaning all the way in to this hyper-nationalism, *'Italy, Italy, Italy, woo!'* side of fascist food rhetoric. Mussolini is desperate to convince Italians that they don't need anyone else's food. [sarcastic] 'Italy **isn't** not importing food from the rest of Europe because of that whole pesky, y'know, *international sanctions* deal. It's because other cultures' food is *beneath us.'*

KN: Right. Because they're *going back to the good old days.*

OM: Exactly. We are going back to the best, *most correct* foods in history. The truest, best, greatest foods of Italy.

KN: Wait, so did they bring back Roman… I don't know, garum and other rotting sludges?

OM: It may have come to that eventually. [laughter] What this mostly means is - first, you move from red meat to chicken and rabbit that you can raise in your backyard. Then, as things get a little harder, from chicken and rabbit, to pasta.

KN: Mm.

OM: And then from pasta, to adding more rice, lots more vegetables. And if most of those *traditional, wholesome, correct* foods happen to be the stuff that only poor people used to eat - well that's just how 'going back to tradition' works!

KN: Ha!

OM: So. If I were to ask you, or any average American (not that you're an average American)

KN: Thank you. [laughs]

OM: to name the most *traditional, iconic* Italian foods -

KN: Oh my goodness.

OM: what might you say?

KN: [fake Italian accent] Spaghetti! Ravioli. Marinara! Oh, and pizza, of course.

OM: Hmm.

KN: Uh - wine, red wine..

OM: Think 'Olive Garden.' You're being too smart. Think average American.

KN: Oh. [laughter] Spaghetti. Zuppa Toscana -

OM: I love that stuff!

KN: Minestrone.

OM: Mm-hmm.

KN: Um… garlic bread.

OM: Yes. Bread, right? Bread…

KN: Bread and, yeah, and uh, and spaghetti sauce.

OM: Basically, pasta…

KN: Absolutely.

OM: vegetables, bread, dairy, grains...

KN: Yep. You just described my ideal diet.

OM: And what if I was to tell you that none of those things were traditional Italian foods?

KN: None? Before the twenties, *none* of these things?

OM: I mean, they were *eaten*. Pasta, of course - always been an important part of the Italian diet.

KN: Okay.

OM: But pasta would not ever have been the **main** course.

KN: Oh!

OM: Pasta is the first, light, 'before you get to the real food'... Bread is the *vehicle* for the important things, not a thing that matters by itself. You disguise it, and use it in other things.

KN: If you're rich. But if you're poor, like - basically you're only eating bread, right?

OM: If you're poor, yeah, you're eating all of these things. But if you are middle-class and up - these are embarrassing.

KN: What *are* you eating?

OM: Meat! Pre-Mussolini, Italian food looks much more like every other European cuisine that we think of. Meat with a carb, meat with a veggie. Meat is the centerpiece of the meal, and everything else is fluff. Recipes like Minestrone soup

KN: Sure.

OM: or potato gnocchi move from, like, what the poorest losers eat, out of what they grow in their backyard, to the peak of a *shining, glorious, unmatched Italian cuisine.*

KN: Do you know what? I couldn't agree more.

OM: [laughter] It worked really well. It worked out well for them.

35:00- 40:00

KN: Garden vegetables, soup and pasta. That's all I eat all the time. I mean, it is absolutely ideal. If you gave me meat every day? No, thank you.

OM: Me too. We, I guess, should have been Italian peasants in another life.

KN: Maybe Mussolini was right?

OM: On this **one** thing.

KN: Yeah, I was just gonna say… that's a good clip. [laughs]

OM: On this ***one thing***, I will agree that Italy has benefited from the choice that Mussolini made. On this ***one thing***, listeners!!! [laughter]

KN: It's very similar to 'Dig for Victory' or all the ways that diets changed all around Europe because of the war. Grow vegetables and eat them.

OM: All across Europe and, and in the US, as we're moving through the depression and we're moving through war -

KN: People are rediscovering vegetables.

OM: and people are growing stuff in their backyard, yeah. And eating what they can grow, because *that's what they have* to eat. Cooking in large-scale batches to save precious fuel. Because - as a cookbook that Diana Garvin quotes notes - it takes the same amount of gas to cook 4 servings of soup, or 14 servings of soup.

KN: Oh!

OM: So you should cook in large batches of things like *sauces*, for example… grandma over the pot...

KN: Yes! And thinking of how she like always tells people to eat more, and I see now -

OM: Big Italian babies.

KN: Huh.

OM: And you've been living through some of the worst food scarcity in Europe for quite a long time, by the time that food scarcity hits the rest of Europe.

KN: Interesting.

OM: This marketing campaign works extremely well. It works **so** well that after the war, and after the end of the regime, and the massive changes of mid-century Italy, and another **80 years** - that narrative remains almost unchallenged. That idea of Italian food as the *most traditional, most wholesome, most hearty, most delicious, most **real** food* in Europe is so firmly established in the minds of Italians, that they carry that idea with them as they emigrate across Europe and to the US. So this is an entirely self-consciously-created reputation that Mussolini intended only as an *internal* propaganda campaign…

KN: Hmm.

OM: and yet it has created a mythology

KN: Wow. Yeah.

OM: that is so strong that, like, at least one US movie per year is made about a woman escaping to Italy to *finally learn how to eat.* [laughter] I mean, it's one of our most deeply embedded tropes. Italy is food and love - but mostly food.

It's astounding to me. It is one of the most wildly-effective rewrites in history, I think. And it was totally and completely unintentional.

40:00- 45:00

OM: So, okay. Yes. This is all very fascinating - but what does any of that have to do with Luisa Spagnoli's Perugina Chocolate factory, you might ask. [laughter] Luisa knows that tapping into this 'homegrown glory' campaign is probably her only chance to override the 'luxury problem' that her chocolates are increasingly facing.

Diana Garvin: So she invents things like fruit-based chocolate bars, and they'll feature domestic ingredients like oranges, lemons, grapes, strawberries, pears, cherries, chestnuts, all of these things that can be produced in Italy on the cheap. And not only was she using these autarkic, made-in-Italy ingredients, but she made the chocolate bars cheaper still, because she could use waste chocolate. You can use way more waste chocolate in a bar than you can with hand-dipped chocolates.

KN: Okay. That sounds amazing. Brilliant.

OM: Yeah, I have eaten some of these. Her chocolate-orange bar is, like, to die for. I ate one of these in Rome years ago, not knowing that this is what I was eating. Divine.

So it gives her both a financial and a marketing advantage.

Diana Garvin: So, obviously, saving chocolate scraps and fruits and nuts was not only lucrative, but it's also an increasing political necessity.

OM: And it works. She also does something fairly brilliant. Luisa Spagnoli will use her connections and her charm to get her chocolates included in the rations boxes that are sent to Italian soldiers.

KN: Ohh, uh-huh.

OM: Now, these boxes contain *everything* they will eat for the week -

KN: But you gotta give the soldiers something to live for.

OM: Right. And when the government starts to include a couple of Perugina's famous Italian candy bars in there, it is likely the first time that many of those soldiers have tasted chocolate in their lives.

KN: Huh!

OM: So suddenly, what was a luxury good only for the elite has become an everyday necessity, packaged right in there alongside rice and toilet paper and macaroni.

Diana Garvin: They are deemed critical for morale. And it was quite brilliant, considering not only the wonderful flavors and the hit of caffeine, but the social stature of chocolate at this time. If you are a soldier who has been conscripted, and let's say you've grown up on a farm, you know very little of fascism beyond some of its propaganda - the chocolate itself is very effective propaganda for the regime.

KN: That's a win-win, because the soldiers can feel kind of pampered.

OM: Exactly. The government can say -

KN: *Look, we're taking care of them!*

OM: *Look how magnanimous we are! We are giving you chocolate, which you could never have had elsewhere*. And even after the war ends, those soldiers are going to probably continue to see chocolate as something they *need*, not as something you get a few times a year, or a lifetime, on very special holiday occasions.

KN: Yeah.

OM: She has turned her chocolate into a basic commodity that absolutely everyone can *and should* buy.

KN: Love it.

OM: She seems to walk this line so carefully, between never actually endorsing the fascist worldview, but using every possible advantage that it could give her to *appear* to embrace the bits of fascist policy that work to her benefit.

Diana Garvin: There was such a tangled relationship between Benito Mussolini and Luisa Spagnoli, vis-a-vis the factory. In 1923, he actually did visit the factory. Tours this very successful, ostensibly pro-autarkic, pro-natalist company. There are archival photos that show all of the female employees, in their little white aprons and their shower-cap-looking kerchiefs, all with their right arms raised in the Roman salute.

And you know, by all accounts, the visit to the factory went very well. Luisa Spagnoli greeted Mussolini with a flower that he's limply holding in almost every photo, looking very un-enthusiastic about it. Giovanni Buitoni is largely showing him around. And she holds back.

45:00- 50:00

Diana Garvin: We could read that as maybe she does not wanna associate herself with the regime as closely, she recognizes some of the dangers inherent there. But it's a very un-Spagnoli move to hold back at all. So I would assume she's doing it for a reason.

And towards the end of the visit, he complimented her. He said, “I tell you, and I authorize you to repeat it, that your chocolate is truly exquisite.” And then just a few weeks later, she uses that quote as the foundation of a marketing blitz so intense…

OM (to Diana): I was gonna say - slap that on the box!

Diana Garvin: [laughs] Exactly. And they did! In fact, they slapped Mussolini's quote over that famous Federico Seneca advertisement with the embracing couple. It's almost like the couple is now being *narrated by* Mussolini? It makes the whole thing very awkward. But… even more for Mussolini than the embracing couple, who then risks losing authority.

OM (to Katie): So - is this a subversive jab at Mussolini, under cover of a marketing campaign? Is she working to destabilize or even mock him? or is she just taking advantage of whatever ground she can gain? Is this a political choice, or a business choice, or not a significant choice at all? No underlying message, just ‘Yay free marketing, obviously we're gonna use this’? It's so fascinating and so complicated to dig out what *might* be behind all of these moves that she makes.

And then there's her brilliant understanding of psychology and the importance of **fun** in a restrictive sort of proto-wartime environment: she launches a set of trading cards.

KN: Huh.

Diana Garvin: There was a collecting game that Perugina pioneered during the 1930s. That was these little collectible cards. The most popular one was based on the Three Musketeers.

You would get a box top with each of your purchases of a Perugina chocolate, and you collect enough of them, you turn them in for a packet of cards - and then you win these fabulous prizes, many of which are other products, or it's tie-ins with other businesses. You can even get a Fiat if you have hundreds and hundreds of them.

And some of them became so popular that they actually started to get in trouble with the fascist regime, because it'd become what the regime called a 'mania,' and it was this consumerist display that was *distracting from the weighty issues of the state.*

KN: Wow, that's clever.

OM: And, of course, you can store your collection of cards in a special album, which you can also earn with Perugina box tops.

KN: Wow.

OM: This is aimed at kids, but everybody loves it.

KN: This is capitalism.

OM: It's just pure unbridled capitalism in the midst of a fascist regime. This also may have helped her stay firmly on the right side of the regime - because the rumor is that Mussolini himself was rather obsessed with these trading cards. [laughter]

KN: Yay.

Diana Garvin: The thing is, they couldn't get in that much trouble because, purportedly, Mussolini himself was a collector. And he was still waiting for the [unintelligible] - there was this one very rare card he supposedly couldn't get his hands on, so they never shut it down.

OM: So, he could not allow Perugina to be shut down. *He needed that card and nothing was gonna get in the way of him getting it.*

KN: Love it.

OM: But one of her best, most iconic products came about in a particularly unusual way: as a coverup for her extramarital affair.

KN: Ooh.

Diana Garvin: It actually is with the March on Rome in 1922, that Luisa Spagnoli crafts luxury from leftovers, dips her hand into one of the troughs of waste chocolate, rolls it into a little ball and tops it with a single hazelnut, and then covers the whole thing in fondant. And she called her creation, at first, the cazzotto, which means "the punch".

Diana Garvin: Because it really does look like there's one little nut knuckle popping out of the top of the chocolate. But offering one's lover a box of punches is not very romantic. It was actually one of the Buitoni's, not Francesco, but Giovanni, who is Francesco's son - the would-be Frank Sinatra in the photo who I mentioned earlier - with all of her hours at the factory, the two had become lovers, and it was his idea to turn cazzotto into kisses.

50:00- 55:00

OM: One day her husband walks in and she is sitting at her desk surrounded with love notes from Giovanni

KN: Ooh

OM: and being incredibly quick thinking, she says, 'Oh, no, no, no. This is a marketing campaign! These aren't from anyone. We're going to put them in chocolates and each chocolate will have a little love note in it. Isn't it great? It's genius.'

KN: That's genius.

OM: And so they did. And still today, the baci, 'the kiss,' comes with a little note inside of it.

Diana Garvin: You still get a little piece of paper. It's almost like a fortune in a fortune cookie.

OM: I've had one of these, have you had one of these? The Baci, it's a like a silver foil with blue stars on it. Delicious. It's round.

KN: Yes! I didn't know what I was having.

OM: Delicious! Covering up an affair.

KN: Love it.

OM: But unfortunately for her, that story did not work too well long-term.

Diana Garvin: So that was the birth of the baci and also the year of the Spagnoli breakup. Even the affair was common knowledge to her employees. Her son, who was, you know, the son of Annibale Spagnoli, later recalls "they were two big shots and they didn't give a damn."

OM: So her husband files for divorce, sells his shares in the company, and she carries on at the head of the brand.

Diana Garvin: Annibale said 'no more.' He actually gives up his shares to their sons, and she's the one who trains them. And in fact, they go on to write some very famous business manuals. So a lot of these strategies get replicated across Italian industry. Luisa Spagnoli

continued to work with young Giovanni to very successfully market the Baci chocolates. Over the next five years, over a hundred million Baci were distributed.

OM: And then, as the regime script tightens even more, rationing becomes even more fierce. She makes another brilliant, innovative leap. Wool is nearly impossible to get - fabric, clothing, anything in that line, almost completely gone. Luisa Spagnoli sees this happening and says, 'You know, there are all of these women who have started raising rabbits at home for meat. What if we give all of these women a couple of angora rabbits each, and we send someone around to teach them how to take care of these angora rabbits and raise them, and then we have them collect the rabbit fur and give it back to us?'

Diana Garvin: She was actually the first person to breed angora rabbits at scale in Italy. So she starts her fashion line out of food.

OM: But we're not gonna skin the rabbits like people have been. That's wasteful. We're gonna comb them.

Diana Garvin: One way to get more from a rabbit is what's called the French Method of harvesting their fur, which is just to take a little comb and brush its fur out every day. So I imagine these are some pretty happy rabbits, as compared to the ones that were down for the grill.

OM: And if you've ever seen an angora rabbit, they are - I mean, they're just a ball of fluff. They are the softest, cutest, long-hair rabbits. And angora rabbit fur is so soft and wonderful. We will teach them how to spin it into yarn and thread, and then send someone around every once in a while to collect this spun rabbit fur and we make clothes out of that.

KN: Okay. Two things: One, that is such a leap from chocolate making that it's - how do you get there?! And two, I love that they don't have to kill the rabbits. I didn't know that. Wow.

OM: And as you said, it is a *huge* leap, but she is never one to miss a marketing opportunity. And her very first product was a pair of angora rabbit fur baby booties

KN: Oh, for your good Italian babies!

OM: made with good Italian rabbit fur… which you can win as a prize in the middle of your Perugina chocolate Easter egg.

55:00- 60:00

KN: [laughs] I see.

OM: Genius! You open your Easter egg, and inside this gorgeous pair of baby booties.

KN: Wait. It's literally inside?

OM: *Inside* the egg, and a little slip of paper announcing the launch of the Luisa Spagnoli fashion line.

KN: Wow.

Diana Garvin: Even the chocolate treats that were being produced during this period were emphasizing new ways of mothering. When you think about some of the chocolate eggs that were being rolled off the factory lines every Easter - so Easter, obviously a holiday associated with rebirth, but also explicitly with *birth*. For Luisa Spagnoli, it was a brilliant bit of cross-marketing.

KN: Wow!

OM: This isn't like a five-cent plastic Kinder egg toy. What a genius way to not just introduce the new product, but as you said, tie it into all of those things: Easter, tradition, babies, Italy… adorable little animals, self-sufficiency, and chocolate. The Luisa Spagnoli fashion line encapsulates all of those things - and it becomes an instant hit.

KN: I mean, I'm converted. I'm sold.

OM: And suddenly people can get clothes again. *Nice* clothes, *fancy* clothes, made of rabbit fur. I think it's that kind of just, skipping over seven or eight steps, that kind of innovative thinking, that makes her so fascinating. And who knows what she could have accomplished…

KN: Uh oh.

OM: But, unfortunately, about four years after launching the Luisa Spagnoli fashion line, she was diagnosed with throat cancer. Giovanni rushed her off to Paris to get treatment, but she died there in 1935.

After her death, her son Mario continued to expand both businesses. The Luisa Spangoli fashion line is still a major presence in Italy, and keeping her chocolates, especially the Baci, one of the most iconic Italian food brands well into the 21st century, still an instantly recognizable brand.

And it's almost impossible to say what she really thought about any of it: about fascism, about Italian politics, about ideology, about food revolution…

KN: Oh, interesting.

OM: But we can say that she created one of the most unexpected empires in food history

KN: I'd say so!

OM: and that she was a pretty significant part of one of the most unintentional and staggeringly influential food narratives in a hundred years.

Diana Garvin: Even with the moral ambiguity of these business choices that she made, she's an incredibly charismatic business leader.

OM: And frankly, I'm just grateful - because her chocolates are *great,* and I brought home about half of a backpack full of them last time I went…

KN: I'm gonna put it on my list for next time.

OM: Luisa Spagnoli: marketing genius, food pioneer, *best boss ever.* [laughter]

Diana Garvin: She was larger than life.

[theme music]

Credits: Huge thanks to Diana Garvin. If you enjoyed this episode, you can find photos, resources, links, and more on our website at What'sHerNamePodcast.com. You'll also find links to Diana Garvin's incredible book *Feeding Fascism*, which I highly recommend. You can follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook where we post lots of photos each week. Music for this episode was provided by Josh Kirch, the Green Orbs, Aaron Kenny, Josh Lippi and the Overtimers, the Mini Vandals, and Kevin MacLeod. Our theme song was composed and performed by Daniel Foster Smith. *What'sHerName* is produced by Olivia Meikle and Katie Nelson, and this episode was edited by Olivia Meikle.