

Cooking Up “Peace”: White Middle-Class Paraguayan Women in the Kitchen during the Stronato

Bridget María Chesterton
SUNY Buffalo State University
chestebm@buffalostate.edu

Using oral histories, magazine and newspaper articles, and historical analyses, this study examines the lives and work of two of Paraguay’s most important twentieth-century cooks, Josefina “Chichita” Velilla de Aquino and Clara “Chuta” Benza de Garófalo. Both women helped shape and reinforce ideas about gender, race, and class in the Paraguayan kitchen under the Stroessner dictatorship (1954–1989). Working with white, middle-class Paraguayans, they influenced notions of domestic “peace” and the roles women should play in household management. In a country often studied as mestizo (mixed race), these women of European descent helped define the proper place and nourishment of white Paraguayan bodies. By educating Paraguayan women in the culinary arts and operating within existing social and political structures, they contributed significantly to the culinary landscape of Paraguay.

Keywords: food, cooking, Paraguay, gender roles, women’s history, dictatorship

A través de historias orales, artículos de revistas y periódicos y análisis históricos, este estudio examina la vida y obra de dos de las cocineras más importantes del siglo veinte en Paraguay, Josefina "Chichita" Velilla de Aquino y Clara "Chuta" Benza de Garófalo. Ambas mujeres ayudaron a dar forma y reforzar las ideas sobre género, raza y clase en la cocina paraguaya bajo la dictadura de Stroessner (1954–1989). Al trabajar con paraguayos blancos de clase media, influyeron en las nociones de “paz” doméstica y en el papel que las mujeres debían desempeñar en la administración del hogar. En un país a menudo estudiado como mestizo, estas mujeres de ascendencia europea ayudaron a definir el lugar adecuado y la alimentación de los cuerpos blancos paraguayos. Al educar a las mujeres paraguayas en las artes culinarias y operar dentro de las estructuras sociales y políticas existentes, contribuyeron de modo significativo al panorama culinario de Paraguay.

Palabras clave: comida, cocina, Paraguay, roles de género, historia de las mujeres, dictadura

Introduction: Historical Context, Food Studies, Original Oral Histories

In 1967, Paraguayan cook Josefina “Chichita” Velilla de Aquino and her assistant, Etele Piacentini, made history by appearing on Paraguay’s only television station at the time, Canal 9, Cerro Corá. While Velilla and Piacentini were pioneers on Paraguayan television, they soon faced competition from Clara “Chuta” Benza de Garófalo, who launched a rival cooking show (*ABC Color*, November 3, 1967, 14; Garófalo 1985, 9). Although Velilla’s program lasted only about a year, Garófalo’s show continued through the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 1990s. Both women profoundly shaped the culinary habits and etiquette of thousands of Paraguayan housewives and domestic workers. Together, they influenced the dietary choices of Paraguayans who sought to preserve certain food traditions and historical elements while also navigating the political realities of their time. This article traces the professional trajectories of these two women, examining how they carved out economic independence even under a dictatorship where traditional gender norms prevailed. In doing so, they challenged traditional gender roles in Paraguay’s economic sphere, yet they achieved this transformation through the socially accepted role of teachers.

After the devastating War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870), Paraguay entered a prolonged period of political instability. Throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, civil war, violence, and political coups characterized the nation’s tumultuous political landscape. In 1904, the Liberal Party came to power, and for the next thirty-two years, Paraguay was governed by Liberal presidents who navigated the country through the devastation of the Chaco War (1932–1935) while introducing economic liberalism. This era of Liberal rule ended in 1936 with the rise of a populist movement that brought a new political party to prominence: the Febreristas. However, the following decades remained marked by political instability and violence until 1954, when a coup brought Alfredo Stroessner to power, inaugurating his thirty-five-year dictatorial rule (1954–1989).

Stroessner and his allies were particularly repressive—even by Latin American standards—regularly violating political and human rights. Well-documented in the historiography of the era, the dictatorship became infamous for imprisoning suspected communists and other political dissidents, including students, medical professionals, and businesspeople (Palazón 2010). Many of these individuals suffered torture and death at the hands of the state. To suppress resistance, the regime maintained meticulous records, culminating in an archive now commonly known as the Archive of Terror (Dinges 2021, 240–241).

While political theorists have extensively debated the conditions that enabled such a prolonged dictatorship, historians have paid comparatively little attention to the societal and cultural life of Paraguay's privileged middle and upper classes—particularly the white, Spanish-speaking elites who controlled the nation's economy, culture, and social structures. This article seeks to expand our understanding of the Stroessner dictatorship by examining how culinary culture played a role in constructing a vision of the nation in which white domesticity and femininity were celebrated.¹ The field of food history has developed a rich and growing historiography. For instance, Jeffrey Pilcher explores how Mexican cooks and cookbooks helped shape national racial ideologies, particularly the concept of *mestizaje* (Pilcher 1999). Influenced by Pilcher's work, Rebekah Pite examines how the Argentine cook Doña Petrona used food to shape middle-class Argentine identity during the mid-twentieth century (Pite 2013). More recently, Begoña Alberdi has complicated such narratives, arguing that cookbooks, despite being traditionally associated with the private sphere, are by no means apolitical (Alberdi 2024). Similarly, anthropologist Amy Cox Hall highlights the intersection of taste, media, politics, and racial and gender narratives in the kitchen in Peru (Hall 2024).

This article builds on these frameworks while also investigating the role of food under authoritarian regimes. Scholars of food studies have increasingly demonstrated the significance of food within authoritarian contexts. Diana Garvin, for example, explores the power of food in Fascist Italy, illustrating its connection to notions of autarky and women's daily lives under the dictatorship. She introduces the concept of "food work," encompassing cooking, agricultural labor, and industrial food production, to argue that women's interactions with food systems constituted a form of political engagement under the regime (Garvin 2022, 4). Similarly, Lara Anderson and Carlos Uxo analyze how women writers in Cuba and Paraguay simultaneously subverted and reinforced gender ideologies during dictatorial rule (Anderson and Uxo 2021). This article extends such scholarship by demonstrating that female cooks not only reinforced traditional gender roles but also played a crucial role in shaping politically charged notions of a "peaceful" and "progressive" Paraguayan state under Alfredo Stroessner.

¹ For political theories on the Stroessner regime, see Miranda (1990), who argues that Stroessner's dictatorship closely resembled that of a traditional Latin American caudillo. Marcial Antonio Riquelme describes how Stroessner assumed power in Paraguay with "an authoritarian constitution, an exclusionary political system . . . and a whole repertoire of fallacious interpretations of such constitutional norms as did exist, most prominently the permanent application of a state of siege that suspended individual rights and guarantees" (Riquelme 1994, 37). More recently, Andrew Nickson has argued that Stroessner's fall resulted from the deterioration of his "sultanic" rule (Nickson 2021). Stroessner's longevity has also been attributed to his strong Cold War alliance with the United States and his ability to secure US financial support (Tyvela 2019). For more on the immigration of Europeans to Paraguay and their rise to the middling sectors of society in the twentieth century, see Benítez Martínez (2010).

Paraguayan historians, such as Olinda Massare de Kostianovsky, have documented the sacrifices Paraguayan women made for their country, particularly during the War of the Triple Alliance, when they sent their male kin to the battlefield to face overwhelming odds. Barbara Potthast, examining this historiographic trend, critiques the portrayal of women’s roles in the war, stating that “this traditional portrayal is harmless to gender hierarchies. It keeps women subordinate to men and thus avoids any direct challenge to the old patriarchy” (Potthast 2004, 60). However, women played a significant role in both the economy and agriculture during the war, continuing their contributions until the bitter end. In this same vein, my research has shown that during the Chaco War, women played an equally important role as letter writers, corresponding with men stationed in the vast “wasteland” west of the Paraguay River. These women were instrumental in maintaining soldiers’ morale and procuring much-needed supplies for the battlefield. Despite these efforts, their contributions were largely forgotten, and women’s wartime sacrifices did not translate into political rights (Chesterton 2014). As Jazmín Duarte Sckell recounts, Paraguayan women did not gain the right to vote until 1961, casting their ballots for the first time in 1963. She notes that women in Paraguay “fought in favor of a woman’s rights, espousing a nationalist discourse and her role inside the family, which did not represent a threat to the status quo of the era” (Duarte Sckell 2021, paragraph 36).² Similarly, this article highlights how Paraguayan women found ways to earn a living, support their families, and engage in public discourse through food, all without disrupting the patriarchal narrative of women’s roles in the workforce and politics.

This study is based on oral histories from former students of Chuta and Chichita, as well as Chichita’s former assistant, Etele Piacentini, and Chuta’s daughter, Sarita Garófalo. These interviews, conducted via Zoom, provide a unique perspective on the transmission of culinary knowledge. I have had the privilege of earning the trust of many Paraguayan women who shared their experiences of learning to cook from Chuta and Chichita. As such, memory becomes a fundamental source of tension in this article. Informants were reluctant to say anything negative about either woman, and none mentioned politics or the dictatorship in their interviews. However, this does not mean that these oral histories cannot provide insight into Paraguay’s political, social, and cultural landscape. Rather, they must be carefully analyzed to understand the roles these white, middle- and upper-class women played in Paraguayan society during the mid-twentieth century.

Additionally, this article draws on documents collected and preserved by Sarita Garófalo, including newspaper clippings she deemed significant. To further deepen our understanding, this study incorporates newspaper and magazine articles from the era. Taken together, these sources provide a clearer picture of daily life and the ways in which gender and racial norms functioned under dictatorship.

² My translations from the Spanish throughout.

Narratives about Chichita and Chuta

In 1966, the Paraguayan Catholic newspaper *Comunidad* advertised cooking lessons taught by Chichita. The classes were scheduled to begin in March, at the end of the Southern Hemisphere's summer, following the traditional academic calendar. The course promised to teach cooking "for beginners," "table setting and international cuisine," and finally, "cake decoration and some specialties" ("Instituto de Arte Culinario, Josefina Velilla de Aquino," 1966). Chichita was one of the first women in Paraguay to open a cooking school where elite Paraguayans could learn to prepare meals for their families and friends, as well as train their domestic workers in culinary skills.

For Chichita and her "friendly competition," Chuta, their work in the kitchen represented a space of domestic tranquility and international flavor during a brutal dictatorship. Together, they created a gendered locale where ideas about the dictatorship could be tested. Under the guise of the motto "Peace and Progress with Stroessner," Chichita and Chuta fostered an environment where beliefs about the regime's stability and domestic life could be observed and examined. Additionally, cooking—long viewed as a female endeavor in Paraguay—provided both Chichita and Chuta with a means to earn a living through teaching, publishing, and advertising.

Josefina Velilla de Aquino was born on December 30, 1916, in Asunción.³ Her nickname, "Chichita," implies a "small girl." Unlike Chuta, who was often addressed with the honorific "Doña," Chichita's students exclusively referred to her by her nickname. According to her cooking assistant, Etele Piacentini, Chichita had served as a nurse during the brutal Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay. She later married Dr. Telmo Aquino, a physician who had studied in Europe. The couple had three children, though only one survived into adulthood. Piacentini recalled Chichita as a generous and kind woman, recounting how she gave the Piacentini family the old wheelchairs once used by her children to aid Etele's brother, who had been disabled by a gunshot injury (Piacentini, Interview, 2021). Chichita's cooking career began shortly after the devastating 1953 flood, with her first cooking lessons held on August 4, 1954—just days before Stroessner's rise to power on August 15. She initiated these lessons as a fundraising effort to aid flood victims, making them the first cooking classes ever offered in Paraguay (Piacentini, Interview, 2021). Her generosity was, as Piacentini emphasized, extensive. She even once gave away a fur coat to a woman in need, despite her husband's objections (Piacentini, Interview, 2021).

³ "Josefina Velilla de Aquino" Portal Guaraní.
https://www.portalguarani.com/972_josefina_velilla_de_aquino_.html. Accessed on April 10, 2024.

Clara Benza de Garófalo (1919–2007) was known to her friends, family, and students as Doña Clara or simply Chuta—a slang term for shooting a goal in soccer. She earned the latter nickname due to her enthusiasm for the sport. According to her daughter, Sarita, even after she stopped playing, “she watched all of the games” (Sarita Garófalo, Interview, 2021). While students occasionally referred to her more formally as Doña Clara, most used the familiar and colloquial “Chuta.” In one of the few surviving video clips of Chuta, the host introduces her as “Professor Doña Clara Benza de Garófalo,” but when speaking directly to her, he addresses her simply as “Chuta” (“Especial de Navidad,” n.d.). This transition from a formal introduction to an informal moniker shapes the rest of the video, creating the impression that the host is conversing with a close friend or family member rather than a celebrity cook or respected professor.

Chuta came from a prominent Paraguayan family. Her father, a beloved physician, served in the Chaco War before later becoming a senator. Chuta pursued her education in Buenos Aires and, upon returning to Paraguay, married an attorney, Giovanni Serrato de Garófalo. Following World War II, Giovanni worked to bring Italian immigrants to Paraguay to help them establish new careers. The couple soon welcomed a daughter, Sarita. However, tragedy struck just four months after Sarita’s birth when Giovanni passed away from leukemia, leaving Chuta to raise their daughter alone (“Las alumnas,” n.d.).⁴

Chuta, like Chichita, was deeply religious and maintained a close relationship with the Salesian order in Asunción. Through this connection, she worked closely with Monsignor Ismael Rolón, a member of the order. Before long, she was offering cooking lessons to women in poorer neighborhoods of Asunción. However, despite her efforts, she was not earning any money. At one point, Rolón confronted her, asking whether she intended to rely on her family’s charity for the rest of her life. According to her daughter, although “she was riding around in a Cadillac,” the car did not actually belong to Chuta but to her brother.

Shocked by the priest’s comment, Chuta resolved to establish financial independence and began teaching formal cooking classes on November 29, 1955 (“Las alumnas,” n.d.). Simply referred to as “cooking classes,” these courses provided her with a means of earning a living in 1950s Paraguay. Her first class consisted of thirty-two students eager to learn from the self-taught Chuta. From the beginning, Chuta lived in a house with her daughter, Sarita, and her helper, Basilia.⁵ According to María Emilia de Núñez, a former

⁴ “Las alumnas agasajaron a Clara de Garófalo,” no data. Newspaper clipping shared with author by Sarita Garófalo.

⁵ Rebekah Pite noted that the famed Argentine cook Doña Petrona had a cooking assistant named Juanita Bordoy, who accompanied Doña Petrona on her cooking show. Noting that Argentina’s “leading domestic couple was not Doña Petrona and her husband Atilio Massut but rather Doña Petrona and Juanita,” Pite highlights the role of women in creating maternalistic patterns in Argentine society (2011, 99). In a similar

student, the three women formed “a family” (Núñez, Interview, 2024). Together, they created a household free from economic dependence on men and removed from the male gaze. Moreover, Sarita recalled that Basilia was like “a second mother to her” (Garófalo, Interview, 2021). This unconventional Paraguayan family provided a model of female-led domestic life.

Chuta was known for her playful sense of humor, while Basilia was much more serious. Despite their differences, they worked together to build both a household and a business. The absence of men in their home was also significant, highlighting their independence in a society where women were often expected to rely on male support. As recounted by Maria Emilia de Nuñez, the joke was as follows:

I [Nuñez] remember that once there was a story about Basilia. Chuta said, “I’m going to tell you a secret. I’m going to tell you, oh, last night there was a smell of a man in the house.” They were all women, right? Chuta was a widow, Basilia was single, and Sarita would have been a girl, she would still be young. And Chuta tells Basilia: “There was a smell of a man in the house. I [Chuta] asked, What’s wrong? What’s happening? And after I left, I discovered that Basilia was smoking.” And then oh, Basilia, Basilia she would complain: “Why do you have to say those things? Those things are not told to people.” (Nuñez, Interview 2024.)

The public nature of their household dynamics may have brought some level of embarrassment to Basilia, but for Chuta, it provided endless comic material. Making Basilia the subject of her humor, she made sure that her assistant was kept in her place, emphasizing a difference in social class between the two women. But it is important to note that she also frequently shared humorous and stressful moments from her classroom experiences with local newspapers. She recalled, for instance, that one student “came to class up to the day of giving birth, but luckily it all ended well at the hospital.” She also recounted a particularly jocular story about a student who had taken a sedative before an exam and ended up sleeping through the entire test (“Los veintitrés años,” n.d.).⁶ Through these anecdotes, we see how Chuta cultivated a familial intimacy with her students—her classroom was not just a place of learning but a space where personal stories were exchanged alongside recipes.

Beyond cooking, Chuta also had a habit of offering romantic advice to her many young female students. According to Doris Albertini, “Chuta was not just a woman who taught cooking; she taught you how to treat a man—your husband, your boyfriend” (Albertini,

fashion, the relationship between Chuta and Basilia was also maternalistic, like that between Chichita and her kitchen assistant Etele Piciantini, who will be written about more extensively below.

⁶ “Los veintitrés años de recuerdos de Doña Clara,” no data. Newspaper clipping shared with author by Sarita Garófalo.

Interview, 2024). She did not hesitate to provide guidance on how to win a man's heart, and given that many of her students were unmarried, engaged, or newly married, her advice was likely well received. María Emilia de Núñez, for example, began classes with Chuta shortly after her wedding in 1975. Similarly, Albertini recounted that she initially attended cooking classes simply to impress her future husband but abandoned cooking altogether once they were married. Albertini described how she “fooled” her husband with excellent meals before their wedding in 1980, only to stop cooking shortly after they began living together. She realized that her career in banking took precedence over domestic tasks, and cooking was a chore she did not personally value—though her husband clearly did, as he had been partially won over by her culinary skills (Albertini, Interview, 2024). Albertini’s experience reflects an awareness of the expectations placed on Paraguayan women while simultaneously demonstrating resistance to traditional domestic roles. She understood the societal image of the “good woman” but ultimately chose not to participate in it. Instead, she prioritized professional aspirations over household duties, using cooking as a strategic tool rather than an enduring commitment.

For Paraguay’s middle and upper classes, household labor was often regarded as a chore best left to others. Many women chose not to engage in domestic work themselves, instead overseeing household staff. In an oral interview, one of Chuta’s former students, María Ruíz, recounted that she began learning to cook from Chuta around 1980, just before getting married. She explained: “At that time, it was not unusual for single girls who were thinking of getting married and forming a family [to believe] that they had to study cooking—or at the very least have an idea of cooking—to be able to run their home, to prepare [food] for their husband and children” (Ruíz, Interview, 2021). According to Ruíz, domestic workers were commonplace in upper-class households: “Everyone had a domestic employee who came to work in their homes. You had to know how to direct that [female] employee, because if you didn’t know how to do anything, how were you going to teach her?” (Ruíz, Interview, 2021). Another former student, “Katty,” echoed this sentiment, stating: “Everyone [of a certain social status] had a domestic servant who worked in their house; therefore, you had to know how to direct that employee, because if you didn’t know how to do anything, how were you going to teach your employee?” (“Katty,” Interview, 2021).⁷

In other words, while Chuta primarily taught women of the elite class, the knowledge she imparted also extended—albeit indirectly—to domestic workers of different social backgrounds. Instructing elite women in cooking was, in many ways, also a means of shaping the culinary training and skills of the household staff they oversaw. Chuta herself described her institute as an inclusive space, stating: “I have had, and continue to have, girls who feel inclined for the kitchen, like young girls about to get married. And don't

⁷ This subject asked me to use a pseudonym. She picked “Katty.”

forget to mention my classes for domestic employees” (“Veinte años de arte culinario,” *La Tribuna*, 1974).

In a similar fashion, Chichita targeted women on the verge of marriage. As articulated in an article in *Ñandé*, a popular Paraguayan magazine of the era, Chichita’s “outstanding qualities have obligated her to become a teacher of several classes for future housewives.” Moreover, the article noted that “there are numerous professional chefs who frequently seek out her knowledge to perfect a recipe or incorporate a new and tasty dish into their menus” (“Cómo se hace,” 1961).

Female domestic employees and male professional chefs interacted with Chichita and Chuta in their culinary schools. However, unlike the upper-class women who attended classes to prepare for married life, these individuals sought out cooking lessons as a means of securing financial independence and providing for their families. In this way, Chichita and Chuta were not just shaping domestic skills but also contributing to the professionalization of culinary labor in Paraguay.

While male students were uncommon in Chichita’s and Chuta’s classes, they were not unheard of. Although stories of male students are rare, one humorous anecdote has endured. As recounted by Chuta in a newspaper article, a male student named Bienvenido Riveras (whose first name means “welcome” in Spanish) was graduating from her class. Given that he was one of the few men in a predominantly female group, Chuta accidentally referred to him as “Bienvenida” (the feminine form of “welcome” in Spanish) instead of “Bienvenido.” Rather than taking offense, Bienvenido stood up, smiled, and responded, “Bienvenido, Señora.” The humor of reversing gendered language—addressing Chuta in the masculine form while correcting his own name—delighted both the teacher and her students. As Chuta recalled: “He was a very good student and left this anecdote as a reminder [of his time at the school]. He later went on to work as a cook at the Hospital de Clínicas.”⁸ This anecdote also underscores the significance of male paid labor in Paraguay’s culinary sector. While Chichita and Chuta trained women primarily for domestic life, they simultaneously instructed men for professional kitchens.

These oral histories also reveal insights into the consumption and transmission of recipes in Paraguayan homes. Books and handouts from Chichita and Chuta’s classes were not merely collected; they were actively used, cherished, and passed down through generations. The dishes taught in their classes were recreated—either by the students themselves or by their domestic workers—ensuring that these recipes became embedded in household traditions. As Paula Caldo has demonstrated in her study of cookbooks in Argentina, women were not just consumers of culinary knowledge but also active creators

⁸ “Deja la cocina para hablarnos de Chuta,” no data. Newspaper clipping shared with the author by Sarita Garófalo.

of it (Caldo 2017). The same can be said of Chichita and Chuta. To extend this argument further, Paraguayan women—and, occasionally, men—were also readers and learners, engaging in a continuous cycle of culinary education and transmission.⁹

Peace and Progress in the Paraguayan Kitchen

The two cooks worked separately but shared the same purpose: to educate Paraguayan women on becoming better homemakers and cooks. Choosing which instructor to study with was a personal decision influenced by various factors, such as her personality or a personal connection to her. María Ruíz, for example, chose to study with Chuta because she had seen her on television and was captivated by her elegance. She recalled: “She was very refined in her way of speaking, she was so charming, she was a refined individual... She appeared to me to be international, she appeared European—very refined, very well-educated, with lots of manners” (Ruíz, Interview, 2021). In contrast, Marta Báez, another former student, explained that she chose to study with Chichita because her mother had been one of Chichita’s students in the 1950s, and she wanted to follow in her mother’s footsteps. She also noted that Chichita “was the ultimate reference for Paraguayan cooking” (Báez, Interview, 2021). While the choice between studying with Chichita or Chuta was shaped by personal factors and preconceived notions of each woman, both ultimately offered similar opportunities. Their classes taught cooking skills and reinforced the ideals of skilled homemaking, contributing to the reproduction of a stable and peaceful Paraguayan household—and, by extension, a stable nation.¹⁰

In 1968, at the height of the Stroessner dictatorship, Chichita gave an interview to the Paraguayan newspaper *La Tribuna*. She was asked about her favorite food (rice pudding), the most important quality in a student (“one who practices the recipes”), and her hobbies (“listening to classical music”). Beyond these superficial questions, however, the interview offers insight into Chichita’s political mindset. When asked about her hopes as a Paraguayan citizen, she responded: “I am a working woman. For that reason, I ask for peace, tranquility and that [we] can always live in such an environment” (“La Redacción pregunta,” 1968). Her words closely echoed the Stroessner regime’s rhetoric, which emphasized stability and tranquility. While she did not explicitly mention politics or Stroessner, her language aligned with government messaging. Notably, neither Chichita

⁹ Literacy rates in Paraguay were never as high as they were in Argentina, where Caldo conducted her research. However, in 1950, it was estimated 34.2% of the population was illiterate (UNESCO 1957, 32).

¹⁰ Other women besides Chichita and Chuta conducted cooking classes in Paraguay during the 1970s and early 1980s. Examples include Tita Russo de Berton and Verónica Duré Mazzei. In the early 1980s, Chuta was asked about this competition and said she had heard about it. But she also said that it had not yet affected her (“No me privaría de ser ‘Doña Clara,’” 1980 printed in pen. Newspaper clipping shared with the author by Sarita Garófalo.) These other cooks, some of whom were trained by either Chichita or Chuta, were also part of Paraguay’s culinary scene, but none reached the same level of fame as Chichita and Chuta. This observation was made in the notebook of Ana Maria K. Almeida, shared with the author in Asunción in May 2022.

nor Chuta referenced politics in interviews or in their cooking manuals, reinforcing the perception that both remained above political discourse and partisanship.

Chichita was also known for her emphasis on etiquette and presentation. As *Diálogo* magazine described her, “She is an entire encyclopedia of good taste, refinement, and that elusive quality that defines elegance” (“La vuelta” 1971). The press did not just praise her in words but also validated her image through recipes and photos. The article included a recipe for *dulce de mandioca* (mandioca jelly), a traditional Paraguayan dessert, alongside a photograph of Chichita smiling, adorned with a long string of pearls and her hair impeccably coiffed. Another image showcased a properly set table—complete with an elegant lace tablecloth, a decanter of water, a plant, and sweets neatly arranged on a platter. The article did more than provide a recipe; it instructed readers on how to present themselves and their homes. It offered a complete vision of domestic refinement—how to prepare a meal, present the body, and set the table. More than just a cooking teacher, Chichita taught Paraguayan women how to entertain and cultivate a warm, inviting, and peaceful household.

Like Chuta, Chichita had a close working relationship with her assistant, Etele Piacentini. Both Piacentini and Basilia were integral to their respective kitchens, forming deep personal bonds with their employers. This relationship was most evident when Chichita served as the matron of honor at Piacentini’s small wedding. In a surviving photograph, Piacentini stands in front of her new husband, with her wheelchair-bound brother beside her. The only other woman in the image is Chichita, holding a glass to toast the newlyweds. In this way, Etele and Josefina cemented their familial and social bonds and contributed to the creation of the notion of domestic tranquility and peace under dictatorship.



Wedding of Etele Piacentini (fourth from the right). Chichita is second from the left.
Used with permission of the Piacentini family.

Teaching and Promoting Whiteness in a Mestizo Nation

Surviving accounts suggest that Chichita’s and Chuta’s classes followed a similar format. Both instructors distributed mimeographed recipes, which students could follow as they observed, asked questions, and took notes (Piacentini, Interview, 2021; Ruíz, Interview, 2021). Chichita was known for tasting dishes during class, particularly when adjusting salt. “She would try the recipes, especially when we had to add salt” (“Katty,” Interview, 2021). At the end of each class, the instructors raffled off the meal they had just prepared, allowing one student to take home a ready-made dish for her family. Those who did not win left with the recipe in hand to replicate at home. Some students later returned to class with their versions, proudly declaring, “It came out just like yours” (Piacentini, Interview, 2021). According to María Ruíz, Chuta also followed up on students’ attempts, inviting them to share their results. A typical exchange might include a student saying: “Yes, *profesora*, I made it, and it came out a bit dry [or] a bit soft.” Chuta would then offer solutions: “Perhaps there was too much of one ingredient, or maybe the oven was too hot or too cold,” ensuring students refined their skills through trial and error (Ruíz, Interview, 2021).

Both women claimed to have founded Paraguay’s first cooking institute. In her cookbook, Garófalo described herself as the “creator of the first Institute of Culinary Arts in the Republic of Paraguay, which grants official degrees from the Ministry of Education and

Culture and is recognized as an authority in the field” (Garófalo 1985, 7). Velilla made the same assertion in her book, stating that in 1964, she registered “the First Institute of Culinary Arts in the country” with the Ministry of Education and Culture (Velilla 1971). While competing for recognition as the “first,” both women sought to establish credibility and reinforce their status as Paraguay’s leading culinary figure. For them, education extended beyond adult women. Teaching children the fundamentals of cooking was also part of Chuta’s vision. In 1968, *La Tribuna* published a special section for children, including two recipes designed for young cooks. One article, titled “For the Little Housewives” (“Para las amitas”), featured a recipe for crepes with *dulce de leche* (a popular South American caramelized milk). To simplify the process, the recipe included illustrated ingredients—flour, milk, baking powder, oil, eggs, and *dulce de leche*—alongside a drawing of a little girl wearing an apron and chef’s hat, reinforcing the idea that cooking was an essential skill for girls.

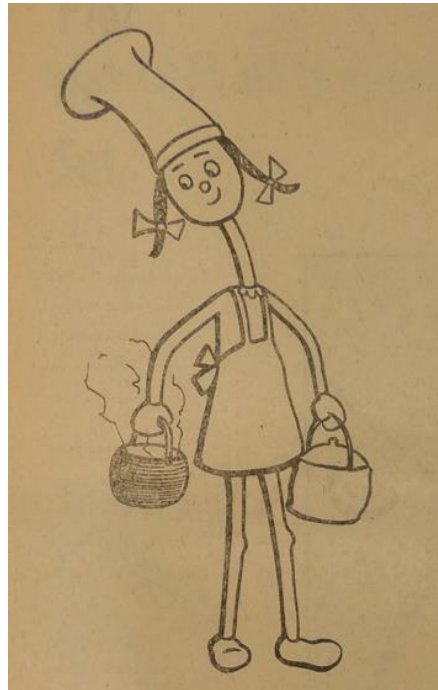


Figure 1. Image of girl cooking in “Para las amitas,” La Tribuna, Suplemento Educativo, October 1, 1968, 7. (Used with permission of the University of Texas Benson Library.)



Figure 2. Image of the dulce de leche ingredients, “Para las amitas,” La Tribuna, Suplemento Educativo, October 1, 1968, 7.

(Used with Permission of the University of Texas Benson Library.)

Similarly, *Así es* published photos of women attending cooking classes, reporting: “This past April 2, classes resumed at the Culinary Arts Institute of Josefina Velilla de Aquino. This year’s courses have been extraordinarily well attended.” A photo showed students holding the recipes they had been given, capturing the enthusiasm for culinary education in Paraguay.



Figure 3. Image of the women in Chichita’s classes. Asi es, 29, May 1965, 40. (Used with Permission of the University of Texas Benson Library.)

Commercializing Success

Both Chichita and Chuta authored highly successful cookbooks that remain in circulation in Paraguay today. Chichita's *Tembi'u Paraguai* (*Paraguayan cooking*) (1971) focused on traditional recipes, while Chuta's *Aquí están mis recetas* (*Here are my recipes*) (1979) leaned toward international cuisine. The cover art of *Tembi'u Paraguai* was designed by renowned Paraguayan modern artist Carlos Colombino, whose illustrations also appear inside. Art critic Osvaldo Salerno described their close friendship, noting that Chichita personally commissioned Colombino's work for her now-classic book (Salerno, Interview, 2024). These connections with Paraguay's artistic and intellectual circles highlight the cultural significance of their recipes.

Both books have gone through multiple editions and remain popular. Chuta's intention was clear: "I wanted to sell the book at a price accessible to all. I would like there to be a copy in every household in our country" ("*Doña Clara dirá*," n.d.).¹¹ While Chichita's book preserved national culinary traditions—featuring dishes like *so'o josopy* (Paraguayan beef soup), *chipá* (Paraguayan cheese bread), and honey-drizzled cheese—Chuta's book reflected her international influences. In the introduction, she referenced culinary figures such as Alexandre Balthazar Grimod de la Reynière (French), Luigi Carnacina (Italian), and Doña Petrona de Gandulfo (Argentine), the latter being a close friend. Their books even shared similar layouts, with Gandulfo's section titled "Important Instructions" mirrored in Chuta's as "It Is Convenient to Know... ." According to Chuta's daughter, Sarita Garófalo, her mother and Doña Petrona exchanged recipes openly: "They had no secrets between them. 'You know what? [Chichita would say to Petrona]: 'I don't use milk in cakes, I only use powdered milk with water, and look, Petrona, the texture comes out better, lighter. . . .' Then Petrona would say, 'I do this thing such-and-such a way, Chuta.' They helped each other, without ego or secrets. That was marvelous" (Garófalo, Interview, 2021). While Doña Petrona remained the more famous of the two, Chuta never saw her success as a threat.

Though widely known as Chuta, Garófalo also earned the nickname "Pechugón," a reference to the popular Paraguayan chicken brand she frequently advertised. As she recalled, a young girl once mistook her for "the woman from the oil OK" (another Paraguayan cooking brand) while on a pilgrimage in Caacupé. Her visibility was welcomed, as she later remarked: "I don't know if cooking has much value, but I would not have deprived myself of this opportunity that God gave me to be with people of all social levels" ("*No me privaría*," [1980]).¹²

¹¹ "Doña Clara dirá: 'Aquí están mis recetas,'" no data. Newspaper clipping shared with author by Sarita Garófalo.

¹² "No me privaría de ser 'Doña Clara,'" [1980], n.p, Newspaper clipping shared with the author by Sarita Garófalo.

This branding extended to her recipes. A 1990s television segment featured her preparing *campanitas*—a large cold tart made with pineapple, peaches, and five deboned Pechugón chickens. The host, Charles González Palisa, noted that Chuta had partnered with Pechugón for seventeen years. With confidence, she declared, “With Pechugón, you can make anything. Everything good” (“Especial de Navidad,” n.d.). Her recipes, in turn, bolstered the brand’s commercial success.

For both Chichita and Chuta, cooking was about more than food—it was about nurturing families and maintaining health. Chuta, who lost her mother at age two, learned to cook out of necessity when her father fell ill: “I never thought of cooking as a necessity until my father got sick. I adored my father, and I forced myself [to cook for him]. I managed to save him, and that gave me great strength.”¹³ This belief in food’s healing power translated into her dietary advice. Though she called herself a *gordita* (chubby and gluttonous), she promoted low-calorie meals, advocating for protein-rich foods, vegetables, and the elimination of sauces and oils.¹⁴

Chichita, also described as a *gordita*, was known for her polished appearance. Etele Piacentini recalled, “She was always well put together, but she would say, ‘Oh, when am I going to lose weight?’ And then she would sit at the table and eat” (Piacentini, Interview, 2021). Marta Báez remembered her as “an older woman with black hair, a deep voice, very lovable, very formidable” (Báez, Interview, 2021). Though weight was acknowledged, their defining characteristics were personality and refinement.

What oral histories rarely mention, however, is that both women were white in a predominantly mestizo society. Paraguay is a bilingual nation (Spanish and Guaraní) with strong Indigenous heritage (Harder Horst 2007, 6), including a deep-rooted tradition of consuming *yerba mate*. Yet, neither woman generally drank the ubiquitous beverage. Historian Julia J. S. Sarreal notes that *mate* in Argentina became associated with lower-class, mixed-race individuals (Sarreal 2022, 1–3), and the same held true for Paraguay.

Sarita Garófalo confirmed that Chuta avoided *yerba mate*: “No, she never drank any *yerba* because she wasn’t used to it. If she was offered the famous *cocido* [*yerba mate* brewed like tea or coffee], of course, she drank it—she was well-mannered. But never in our house. I don’t know if it was because she was the child of [white European] foreigners or because she lived abroad. But she didn’t drink *mate* or *tereré* [cold *yerba mate*]” (Garófalo, Interview, 2021).

¹³ Alicia Murto, “Dona Clara Benza de Garófalo,” n.d. Newspaper clipping shared with the author by Sarita Garófalo.

¹⁴ Alicia Murto, “Necesidad calórica,” n.d. Newspaper clipping shared with the author by Sarita Garófalo.

Similarly, Piacentini emphasized that neither she nor Chichita consumed *yerba mate*, repeatedly mentioning their “European” heritage. This racial distinction likely stemmed from European discomfort with the Indigenous custom of sharing a communal drinking vessel (*mate* or *guampa*) and straw (*bombilla*) (Pite 2023, 3). To them, this ritual might have seemed unhygienic.

Despite rejecting *mate*, they still positioned their bodies and culinary practices as Paraguayan. In *Tembi’u Paraguai*, Chichita wrote: “Our cooking is like our race—it comes from two wombs: the Spanish and the Guaraní.” She envisioned Paraguayan cuisine—like Paraguayan identity—as a blend of European and Indigenous influences. However, refinement was key. Dishes like *chipá* and *so’o josopy* could be served as “the height of gastronomic refinement” when presented on “an immaculate white tablecloth” (Velilla 1971). In this way, Paraguayan food was acceptable for European-descended Paraguayans—so long as it was plated with sophistication.

Conclusion

For the women of Paraguay, Chuta and Chichita remain the most respected and admired cooks of the twentieth century. Their legacy endures in the nation’s collective memory and cultural heritage. Their cookbooks, which have gone through numerous editions, are cherished in many households. While mimeographed recipe handouts are rarer today, they still survive in Paraguayan collections, carefully bound in notebooks or preserved in plastic sheets. I have been fortunate to photograph and document some of these recipes, thanks to the generosity of women who have shared them.

Though cooking may appear apolitical, Chuta and Chichita’s work reveals its deep political dimensions—in this case, that Paraguayan women could and did seek the “peace” and “progress” of the Stroessner regime in their kitchens. Their collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Culture, underscores how cooking was a means of shaping national peace through education. By crafting an image of domestic stability and refinement, they taught women not only how to cook but also how to navigate the expectations of a white, middle-class Paraguayan society eager to embrace their culinary expertise.

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Bridget María Chesterton is professor of History at Buffalo State University. She earned her PhD at SUNY Stony Brook in 2007. Her publications include *The Grandchildren of Solano López: Frontier and Nation in Paraguay, 1904–1936* (University of New Mexico Press, 2013), and articles in *Journal of Women’s History*, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, *Journal of World History*, and *Journal of Social History*. Her current project under contract with the University of Pittsburgh Press is titled *Hotel Guaraní: The Brazilianization of Paraguay’s Middle Class during the Stroessner Years* and considers consumerism during dictatorship.

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