

# **NOMADIC FOODS ADAPTATIONS AND HYBRIDISATIONS IN IMMIGRANT CUISINES: THE CASE OF THE ITALIAN DIASPORA**

## **CIBI NOMADI ADATTAMENTI E IBRIDAZIONI NELLE CUCINE DEGLI IMMIGRATI: IL CASO DELLA DIASPORA ITALIANA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Food is a crucial element in shaping and reinforcing identities, especially in the context of migration, where the weakening of emotional ties due to physical distance can lead to a sense of irreparable loss. In the experience of migrants, food and its associated rituals play a fundamental role, serving as a bridge between the present and one's emotional past. The "food of home" becomes one of the most powerful tools for preserving and sustaining both individual and collective identities. Migration places food memories under strain, subjecting them to change and adaptation. Family recipes evolve, yet in the minds of

those who prepare and consume them, they remain the familiar “food of home”. Over time, they transform into the “food of memory”, a sensory archive that evokes recollections and emotions linked to the past; the taste of childhood, the scent of a grandparent’s kitchen, the dish shared during family celebrations. Every bite becomes a journey through time, reviving stories and traditions. Taste and smell intertwine with nostalgia, turning food into a bridge between past and present. In this way, cooking is not merely for nourishment but also an expression of storytelling and identity.

This paper aims to contribute to the discussion on food practices, and focusing on the Italian diaspora, explores how culinary habits, rituals, and memories play a central role in all migration experiences.

**Keywords:**

Nomadic food, Food diaspora, Food hybridisation, Food and media, Italian food, XX-XXI centuries

**RIASSUNTO:**

Il cibo è un elemento cruciale nella costruzione e nel rafforzamento delle identità, soprattutto nel contesto migratorio, dove l’indebolimento dei legami affettivi dovuto alla distanza fisica può generare un senso di perdita irreparabile. Nell’esperienza dei migranti, il cibo e i rituali ad esso associati svolgono un ruolo fondamentale, fungendo da ponte tra il presente e il proprio passato emotivo. Il “cibo di casa” diventa uno degli strumenti più potenti per preservare e mantenere vive le identità individuali e collettive. La migrazione mette a dura prova i ricordi legati al cibo, sottoponendoli a cambiamenti e adattamenti. Le ricette di famiglia si evolvono, ma nella mente di chi le prepara e le consuma restano sempre il familiare “cibo di casa”. Col tempo, esse si trasformano nel “cibo della memoria”, un archivio sensoriale che evoca ricordi ed emozioni legati al passato: il sapore dell’infanzia, il profumo della cucina dei nonni, il piatto condiviso durante le feste di famiglia. Ogni boccone diventa un viaggio nel tempo, capace di far rivivere storie e tradizioni. Gusto e olfatto si intrecciano alla nostalgia, trasformando il cibo in un ponte tra passato e presente. In questo modo, cucinare non è soltanto un atto di nutrimento, ma anche un’espressione di narrazione e identità.

Questo articolo intende inserirsi nella riflessione sulle pratiche alimentari e, concentrandosi sulla diaspora italiana, esplora come abitudini culinarie, rituali e memorie rivestano un ruolo centrale in tutte le esperienze migratorie.

**Parole chiave:**

Cibo nomade, diaspora alimentare, ibridazione culinaria, cibo e media, cucina italiana, XX-XXI secolo.

## Nomadic foods: an introduction

This paper discusses food customs in diaspora around the world, and the importance of food-related habits, rituals, and memories in migration. Food is a powerful link to one's place of origin and the domestic and emotional environment left behind as well as a key marker of identity, especially for migrants. Preparing, serving, offering, and consuming "food from home", which becomes over time the "food of memory", is a vital means of affirming and preserving identity. Through food and culinary practices, migrants share a tangible connection to their geographical and cultural roots with relatives, friends, and acquaintances. As a central element of culture<sup>1</sup>, food should be seen as an extension of identity, passed down through generations and deeply embedded in the migrant experience. It transcends the individual sphere to become a collective heritage, strengthening the bonds within migrant communities and preserving their cultural legacy.<sup>2</sup>

Over time, the exposure of memory-based food practices to local customs leads to a process of hybridisation or "fusion", which gradually alters the taste of "memory food". Recipes are adapted to the availability of raw materials and at the same time, there are significant changes in the agricultural, agro-industrial, and distribution systems in areas with high levels of immigrants, in order to meet the demand for specific foodstuffs. In many cases, the heritage of food becomes an economic resource. It constitutes fragments of identity around which new products appear. Existing

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1 Montanari & Capatti 1999; Montanari 2004.

2 Cattarulla 2019.

research highlights the importance of food in the analysis of emigration in terms of identity and culture, but its impact on the economy can also be significant. There are many examples, ranging from the early pizzerias in Buenos Aires at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>, to the arrival of Asian cuisines in Europe<sup>4</sup> a few decades later, to the more recent phenomenon of the spread of Halal butcher shops in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

## Towards a new homeland: emigration

By 1940, the first mass migration of Italians had come to an end, but it had given rise to new production activities in destination countries, one in particular which was to become an important industry. The cultivation and processing of the tomato was to lead to widespread prosperity.<sup>6</sup>

Emigrants are an exemplification of nomadism; they are the true vector which takes food habits to destination countries, and provide the growing demand for “typical products” from the homeland which stems from nostalgia or *mal du pays*. Initially, this demand is met by importing products. But the high cost of transport and difficulties in preservation and storage eventually make it more efficient to produce certain goods locally, so the production systems in destination countries typically adapt to meet the demand.

Canned tomatoes, as well as paste, concentrate, and *passata*, etc. have been the key players, along with pasta and cheese, in these intercontinental export flows. Today, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile are among the largest tomato producers in South America, but the incentive for growing tomatoes, which originated in Mexico, came from European emigrants. It was Europe, which had adopted the tomato centuries earlier, which “re-exported” it to South America to meet the food needs of emigrants.

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3 Armus & Ubelaker-Andrade 2017; Ravveduto 2023; Balsas & Capelli 2023; Dirección general patrimonio e istituto histórico 2008.

4 Campani 1994; Pieke 2004; Chen 2021; Chan Tat Chuen 2016; Fumey 2013; Gibet 2021; Janes 2014; Sen, Saberi & Bhattacharyya 2023; Buettner 2008.

5 Rhazzali 2019; Saint-Blancat, Rhazzali & Bevilacqua 2008; Rhazzali 2019; Armanios & Ergene 2018.

6 Gentilcore 2010.

This could be described “Columbian exchange,” taking place in two stages; the second being the “return home” of a plant which had “discovered” its role in cookery in Europe, thanks to European gastronomic culture.

In the sense that it crossed the oceans twice in a few centuries, the tomato can be called a “nomad”. The protagonists in the story are to some extent Hispanics, but mainly Italian emigrants to the Americas. In the Italian diaspora, pasta with tomato sauce continued to be a well-loved dish, and this gave rise to the ritual of making tomato sauce at home, in a link to homeland traditions.<sup>7</sup> And during the Second World War, when European industry was struggling to support the war economy and the production axis shifted, this contributed to the development of tomato growing and processing in the New World.

Migration obviously has many other meanings and implications. From a dietary point of view, for example, Italian migration to the Americas involved a radical change in food standards and diet structure. This began with the voyage itself. Edmondo De Amicis in a book<sup>8</sup> published in English as *‘On Blue Water’*<sup>9</sup> describes peasant emigrants on ships crossing the Atlantic eating better than they ever had before. Each emigrant received 4 kg of wheat bread, 1.5 kg of meat, 1 kg of pasta and 3.5 litres of wine per week, which meant 570 g of bread; 214 g of meat; 143 g of pasta and half a litre of wine per day. There was also rice, salt cod, tuna, anchovies, cheese, potatoes, beans, lentils, peas, onions, olive oil, tomato paste, coffee and sugar. For many emigrants, this was already a radical change; and when they reached their destination, things were often to improve even further, and the narrative of hunger would change radically. Leonard Covello, a high school teacher, recalls his life in Avigliano in Basilicata, which he left at the age of 9, and the extreme shortage of food. There were times when “there was nothing to eat in the house. Then we would lock the door and bang the plates and cutlery to give our neighbours the impression that we were eating our midday meal as usual”.<sup>10</sup>

Once they arrived at destination, no matter how difficult previous living conditions had been, the immigrants found food in greater quantities than

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7 Ortoleva 1992; Pizzirani 2014–15.

8 De Amicis 1889.

9 De Amicis 1897.

10 Gentilcore 2010: 135.

they had ever known. The biggest improvement was the availability of meat. In Brazil and Argentina, newly arrived Italians were astonished at how inexpensive it was, cheaper than vegetables, which completely overturned the traditional food hierarchies of poverty. Eating meat was one of the peasants' biggest aspirations. "In America, I ate meat every day!" are the words of a farmer who returned to Nicastro, Calabria, after many years of working in Pittsburgh. Even the poorest could afford to eat it. The family of shoe shiner Rocco Cornesca, who emigrated to New York, were extremely poor, and they wore rags as clothes. But they had enough to eat and could afford meat almost all the time, much more frequently than in Italy.<sup>11</sup> A peasant from the province of Cuneo describes the benefits of a situation that, despite many difficulties, had its advantages: "The only thing that was not lacking was meat. [...] In Argentina, meat was like polenta for us at home".<sup>12</sup> Meat became the primary food. Workers in the rural areas of the Pampas grew tired of a diet of "pasta, rice, meat, and more meat", which was paradoxical for people who had fled from hunger and misery.<sup>13</sup>

The lives of emigrants, of course, continued to be hard, as they faced challenges of social integration together with homesickness for a land left behind out of necessity. Living conditions were often extremely harsh, and this was sometimes compounded by the stigma and contempt with which emigrants were held. But food standards improved markedly, and on a material level this compensated for emotional and relational deprivations and difficulties.

## In search of Homeland: Little Big Italy

Francesco Panella is a well-known restaurateur in both Italy and the United States. The Panella family has run L'Antica Pesa, a restaurant in Trastevere in Rome, serving local cuisine, since 1922. Over its one hundred years of existence, the restaurant has become a landmark in dining and has hosted statesmen like Sandro Pertini and celebrities like Madonna,

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11 Gentilcore 2010: 135.

12 Gentilcore 2010: 136.

13 Gentilcore 2010: 136.

Morgan Freeman, and Jennifer Lopez.<sup>14</sup> In 2012, Francesco moved to New York, and opened an American branch of the restaurant in Brooklyn, using the same recipes and ingredients. It attracted numerous celebrities and rapidly became a great success. Panella built a reputation as an expert on Italian cuisine in the United States and also published a restaurant guide for Brooklyn.<sup>15</sup> Later, he expanded his business internationally, and opened restaurants in Qatar and Corsica, and more recently became a co-founder and partner in a new Fast Quality Food hamburger restaurant in Milan. Panella is considered to be a key figure in the restaurant trade because of his international experience, extensive knowledge of Italian cuisine, and entrepreneurial spirit.

Panella's *Little Big Italy* is a prime time television series broadcast on Channel *Nove* and available on streaming platforms.<sup>16</sup> Since 2018, seven seasons, totaling around eighty episodes, have been produced across more than thirty countries, with the most recent season starting in October 2024. The program was initially watched by Italian audiences, with a share of 2 to 3 percent, i.e. approximately 500,000 viewers per episode. The stream reached larger numbers. Each episode features three participants who live in the chosen location and have Italian roots. These people select a local restaurant which they believe best represents traditional Italian cuisine, *italianità* or the essence of Italy. This *Italianness* is the main criterion for Panella and the entire show.

The participants may have emigrated recently or long ago, and have often opened their own businesses, and in some cases, “invented” a job once they arrived in their new environment. The three participants each choose a restaurant in the area, and choose a dish which they believe best represents Italy, and Panella himself also selects a typical regional dish. The chefs themselves also chose a dish they consider representative of their own cooking. The three dishes are sampled by all the diners, and a score from 1 to 5 is assigned, along with a score up to 10 from Panella on the *Italianness* of the restaurant. Panella is considered the guarantor of the restaurant's loyalty to the traditions of Italian cuisine.

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14 Crocoli & Piscina 2023.

15 Panella 2014.

16 <https://nove.tv/programmi-nove/little-big-italy-dove-vederlo-tv-streaming>

*Little Big Italy* is an entertainment program, but it reveals the emotional mechanisms behind the processes of “food nomadism”. At its core is the experience of emigration, and the conflicting feelings that come with it. Everything is suspended between reality and memory, between the yearning for the lost homeland and adaptation to the new reality. The smells and tastes of home serve to bridge the chasm with the present, and people try to reconstruct the ‘food grammar’ of their memories.<sup>17</sup> The program is based on two main themes: on one hand, it tells the story of Italian emigrants, and on the other, it explores the authenticity of Italian cuisine abroad. It also presents various cities around the world, showcasing the most significant landmarks and describing the key characteristics of the country’s history and lifestyle. This brings to life the context of the restaurants and the emigrants themselves. Telling the stories of Italians who have emigrated, whether out of necessity or choice, the program offers a deeper understanding of present-day Italy and, simultaneously, the world.

Each character, guest, restaurateur, or chef has their own story, and each arrived in the host country for different reasons and at different stages in their lives. Some have opted to emigrate because they came from a small town or city with unacceptable living standards. Many are from the South, from large cities like Rome, Naples, and Palermo, and others came from small inland villages. A common feature of these places is high unemployment and poor economic conditions. As it always has in the past, emigrating to a foreign country provides the opportunity for a new life and perhaps a second chance to succeed. Young people, on the other hand, often leave Italy in the desire for new experiences and lifestyles, and some remain abroad after a period of work experience. Others start their own business venture, perhaps with a new partner.

All these stories reveal certain common characteristics of Italian emigrants: curiosity, a continuous spirit of exploration, an interest in other cultures, openness, adaptability, professionalism, perseverance, diligence, and the desire to start a new venture while bringing something of their own – something of their culture, way of life, and *Italianness*. This is always evident in the expatriates’ strong and continuing attachment to Italy.

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17 Such emotions among migrants are recorded in many publications. See for example Gibelli & Caffarena 2001; Teti 2001.

They remember their life in Italy as precious, sometimes very difficult, but it is always a reference point. When Panella asks them to talk about Italy, many share their memories of their homeland, their loved ones, and their traditions. They speak of lost flavors, family recipes, and what they learned from their grandparents. As they recall and recount these sometimes sad and nostalgic memories, some of the participants become emotional, although all are proud of having made their entrepreneurial dreams come true.

The expatriates never, however, express the wish to return to Italy, where they often left unsatisfactory jobs or lives. Some arrived with experience in the restaurant business, but many others “reinvented” themselves as restaurateurs, believing that simply being Italian, and thus inheritors of a rich food culture, would be enough. *Italianness* is thus the key to excellence, the essential element of entrepreneurial success in the restaurant industry. Italian restaurants around the world, simply through their name and style, promise an authentic Italian experience. Some of them live up to these expectations, including in the interior decor, while others simply imitate fashionable restaurants or are “touristy”. Often, symbols of *Italianness* are superficial. They can be disconnected and hastily assembled, and thus fail to evoke the atmosphere of a true suburban trattoria or country inn in Italy.

Inside, there may be elements that are characteristic of an Italian restaurant, *trattoria*, *pizzeria*, or *bottega*, but they do not work because of the way they are placed side by side, according to the restaurateur’s taste, or in typical local contexts. There may also be great attention to recreating the “eating at the table” experience and the table setting. This can be traditional or modern, ranging from the classic red and white checked tablecloth of the trattoria to the white tablecloth typical of an expensive restaurant, or even no tablecloth, with just a cutlery rest and a napkin, as contemporary dining fashions dictate. Often, in a good restaurant, the staff and service, as well as the food, are of top quality. The menu is often written in Italian, but the local language, which the waiting staff speak, is used to describe most of the ingredients, with some Italian terms used.

Another key factor in choosing the winner of the *Little Big Italy* competition is the “faithfulness” of the tasted dishes to authentic Italian cuisine, in other words, how closely they align with what Panella, undis-

puted authority, considers to be the true taste of *Italianness*. Naturally, the dishes often differ significantly from what is traditionally considered “Italian”, even when the grammar of flavours and textures is faithfully reproduced. Some traditional dishes are completely altered because the correct ingredients may not be available or a lack of knowledge regarding proper preparation techniques may not be known, but they frequently appear on menus. In the American culinary world, for instance, lasagna is often made with dried pasta, rather than freshly made sheets, and served with the meatballs that are typically served with *spaghetti* or *bucatini*. In Asian countries, the traditional spaghetti accompaniment of garlic, olive oil, and chili pepper is often supplemented with a variety of other spices. The *schnitzel*, or Milanese breaded veal cutlet, or which is another staple of Italian cuisine, can be any type of meat, topped with cheese, vegetables, and other cured meats. Other recipes suffer from glaring omissions: *gnocchi alla sorrentina* can be made without mozzarella and *pasta alla Norma* without salted ricotta. In some cases, even the veal and tuna sauce in *vitello tonnato* are replaced by roast beef and mayonnaise.

Sometimes, there are extra ingredients rather than omissions, pasta with *pesto alla Genovese* can be enriched with gorgonzola, *eggplant parmigiana* served with pasta, or *pizza Margherita* with an extra helping of Parmesan, for example. These modifications are often driven by the absence of ingredients, as restaurateurs and chefs explain to Panella when he asks about a specific traditional regional dish, or to cater to local tastes. In some cases, they stem from a lack of knowledge of the original recipes.

Even when recipes are followed faithfully, it is not uncommon for flavours to differ with “tradition”. This is usually because of different preparation techniques: the pasta may be undercooked or overcooked, the sauce too heavy because it contains too much oil or butter, or the flavour combinations may feel unfamiliar, which can all make it difficult to immediately recognize the dish. In some cases, there is inappropriate frying. Less frequent, but not unheard of, is Panella’s surprise at the faithful reproduction of defining characteristics of a dish. This is often the result of the chef’s experience in the restaurant industry in Italy or a deep-rooted family culinary tradition, absorbed from childhood with care and dedication. In these cases, it is the skills acquired over time that enable a precise, almost scholarly reproduction of recipes – choosing the right ingredients

and applying the correct preparation and cooking methods. A key factor in achieving this authenticity is the chef's familiarity with the typical flavours of Italian cuisine, made possible through hands-on experience and regular return trips to Italy. These trips will refresh memories, renew sensory perceptions, and "update" taste to reflect contemporary Italian cuisine. More often than not, however, the image seen overseas is of an Italy that no longer exists. It is an Italy that has adapted to the cultures and customs of its host countries. The memories of expatriates, like their recipes, reflect a simplified and idealized version of Italy. In the words of Panella, it is "an Italy that is not in Italy".<sup>18</sup>

The restaurants and trattorias on *Little Big Italy* serve as guardians of Italian cultural heritage abroad, although in a form that is not entirely faithful to tradition. They conserve tradition but they are also channels of transmission, fostering exchange between different people and cultures. Italian-run restaurants around the world often aspire to encapsulate the essence of Italy in its entirety. But in reality, they are the result of complex interactions with foreign socio-cultural contexts and are shaped by the interaction between local communities, Italian emigrants, and their collaborators, who are often foreigners themselves. *Little Big Italy* brings the key themes of food history into the realm of Food Entertainment: gastronomic roots, the faithfulness of traditional recipes and flavours in the diaspora, and the resilience of taste in the face of transformations imposed by new territorial and cultural contexts. The program dramatizes the nomadism and hybridisation of cuisines, showcasing the experiences of its protagonists and their enduring gastronomic *mal du pays* – a nostalgic longing that becomes the common thread connecting the life stories and cooking competitions at the heart of the show. It recounts the journey of Italian cuisine and its close encounters with new flavours. It tells of family traditions passed down through generations, safeguarded in secret recipes that are never written down, as they meet and merge with different histories and cultures. These encounters shape Italian cuisine but also drive its gradual evolution. In a light-hearted and entertaining format, the show addresses complex and thought-provoking themes. A further key element of *Little Big Italy* is the comparison between the "remoteness" and

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18 Crocoli & Piscina 2023.

“closeness” of contestants’ dishes to an idealized “true Italian taste” – the so-called *Italianness* – judged unequivocally by Francesco Panella. This raises numerous open questions, such as whether taste can be measured *objectively*, and more importantly, whether it can be conveyed through media that engage only two of the five senses. More broadly, the show invites us to reflect on the very concept of “tradition”, revealing how it is often a social construct in constant evolution, shaped by memory, nostalgia, shifting taste codes, and, more simply, the natural evolution of trends and habits.

## Longing for Homeland

Every human being, when uprooted from familiar surroundings, experiences nostalgia – a longing for home. Over time, they will adapt to changes and to new sounds, colours, scents, and tastes, but the memory of the *Heimat* often lingers as a quiet yearning for the past. It is the recollection of the *taste of home*<sup>19</sup> that resurfaces, intertwining with new flavours. Often, the craving for familiar tastes, those of childhood, emotionally intensified by memories of loved ones, perhaps parents or grandparents who are no more, becomes especially strong. At these times, *memory foods* can be a symbolic bridge to the past, reconnecting individuals to their roots.

The evolution of national (or regional) cuisines in diasporic communities leads to a gradual divergence from the “authentic” national cuisine. This is due to the influence of the new home in aspects such as preferences in taste, cooking techniques, meal structures, and social or religious dietary prescriptions, as well as differences in food production and processing methods, climate, and soil composition, all of which significantly affect the organoleptic properties of raw ingredients. The result is that the two branches of the *ethnic cuisine* diverge, each following its own evolutionary path. Over time, the differences become increasingly pronounced, in a process of *divergent evolution*.<sup>20</sup> The taste preferences of expatriates also

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19 Ducrot 2009.

20 Divergent evolution consists of the development of different characteristics in two

change over time, gradually diminishing their ability to recognize elements of *Italianness* in Italian cuisine. In *Little Big Italy*, this is particularly evident, as the show demonstrates how short-term expatriates tend to retain a stronger connection to traditional flavours. In this sense, nostalgia and longing serve as compensatory factors for the progressive detachment from the tastes and aromas that once defined one's sense of *Italianness*.

Emigrants' nostalgia is often intertwined with yearning for home, in a material sense for the physical place, and in a symbolic sense for the seat of affections and emotions. In both short and long migration processes, certain dynamics tend to unfold in predictable ways. They start with departure from the homeland, which means leaving behind one's home, familiar places, and the community where one is known and recognized. After this separation, nostalgia is so intense that it can even lead to illness may arise. It becomes a longing for home, which often recedes into the imagination rather than being a tangible reality. Nostalgia concerns intangible elements that define identity: loved ones, familiar faces and greetings, as well as place; a village, a building, or a town square. It is a longing to go back to personal roots that have shaped one's life; places, people, and relationships, along with scents and flavours. Nostalgia can become a type of therapy that soothes the feeling of being displaced and unmoored, without a fixed place to return to, without a family or community to belong to. It can be a sort of shield, a protective force that preserves one's identity.

Over time, nostalgia fragments and softens; and becomes almost iridescent. It is both consolation, as soothing as a memory illuminated by a ray of light, and refuge, as comforting as the recollection of a mother's embrace. Of course, it is linked to scents and flavours as well as objects and images, and these too can offer solace at times of disorientation and frustration. Without exploring the significance of Proust's madeleines in detail, it is clear how deeply the concept of *home* resonates with the protagonists of *Little Big Italy*.

Alberto Grandi proposes a different theory, essentially rejecting the idea of Italian cuisine and arguing that "true" Italian cuisine is that which

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(or more) populations that share a common ancestor. It can lead to the formation of different varieties of the same species, adapted to the specific environmental conditions in which they live, or if it acts long enough, to the emergence of new species. See Balboni 2002: 53 ff.

developed from the experience of Italian American emigration.<sup>21</sup> These provocative claims – essentially denying the existence of an authentic Italian cuisine in favor of a supposedly more “genuine” Italian American version – are as media-friendly as they are historically one-sided. Reducing the complexity and depth of Italy’s culinary tradition – shaped by territories, local knowledge, artisanal continuity, and centuries of cultural layering – to a fabricated narrative born of emigration risks promoting a caricatured vision. Italian cuisine is not a recent invention or a myth to be debunked, but a living historical process, constantly evolving and deeply rooted in place and community.

## Creolisation of taste

In this study, *creolisation* refers to concepts such as hybridisation, syncretism, *métissage*, blending, and fusion. These terms all describe the blending of tastes, flavours, techniques, and memories that, often unconsciously, give rise to the overlaps that define *creolised* foods. A very clear example of creolisation across the globe is spaghetti, an emblem of Italian cuisine which is endlessly reinterpreted across cultures. As noted above, another example is the Milanese cutlet or schnitzel, which also exists in multiple and highly diverse variations around the world, each shaped by local influences.

*Spaghetti alla bolognese* is a dish on offer in any Italian restaurant abroad, and it serves as an iconic symbol of *Italianness*. It is however a striking example of the “invention of tradition”<sup>22</sup>, where two separate culinary traditions have been combined to create a completely “a-traditional” recipe. Countless pages have been written in an attempt to trace its origins<sup>23</sup>, but *Spaghetti alla bolognese* is not a recipe of Italian tradition. There is no mention of it in historical cookbooks, nor does it appear on the menus of restaurants in Bologna<sup>24</sup>. It is in fact a hybridisation of two widely accessible

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21 Grandi 2018 e 2024.

22 On the application of this concept to food typicality see Ceccarelli, Grandi & Magagnoli 2013.

23 Valdiserra 2016.

24 Cesari 2019.

elements, spaghetti and *ragù alla Bolognese*, or Bolognese meat sauce. The origins of the dish, in fact at a great distance from Bologna, and factors in its success, are surprising. The birthplace of the dish was in fact Turin. It was first mentioned in the newspaper *La Stampa* on April 22, 1898, when the Hôtel Ville et Bologne advertised its menu, featuring *Spaghetti di Napoli alla Bolognese*. The Turin-Bologna-Naples-triangle, connecting Savoyard Piedmont, the Papal States, and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies indicates that the intention in creating the dish was no doubt to establish an emblem of Italian cuisine at a time when Italy was just beginning the process of unification.<sup>25</sup> The dish gained popularity, particularly abroad, precisely because it is an emblem of *Italianness*; in other words it is an exaggerated representation of Italian cuisine as imagined outside Italy. In this romanticized vision, Italy often appears to be a land of plenty, where streets are paved with pizzas topped with improbable ingredients and boats laden with spaghetti in meat sauce sail down rivers of cappuccino.

The case of spaghetti with meatballs is similar. Known as *spagballs* in Australia, where it has become a national dish, it is a perfect fusion of two typically Italian dishes, both evoking a sense of home-cooked comfort. Over time, *spagballs* has come to symbolize Italian identity, even though, in reality, it exemplifies the transformations that any cuisine undergoes when it exists far from its homeland, continuously subjected to external influences, adaptations, and reinterpretations. Through the lens of culinary nomadism, *spagballs* is the legitimate offspring of migratory movements and the inevitable “infidelities of the palate” that shape taste, identity, and culinary preferences over time. Another example of creolisation is the Milanese cutlet. Over the years, in the kitchens of the Italian diaspora, the ever-present tomato sauce was added, giving rise to *Veal Parmigiana*<sup>26</sup> – a breaded cutlet, first fried and then cooked with tomato sauce and cheese. This is a hybridisation of the classic schnitzel<sup>27</sup> and Eggplant Parmigiana.

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<sup>25</sup> Montanari 2022.

<sup>26</sup> *Veal parmigiana* (<https://www.jamieoliver.com/recipes/beef/veal-parmigiana/>).

<sup>27</sup> *Costoletta alla milanese*, Document attached to the P.G. resolution concerning: ‘De. Co. (Denominazione Comunale, Municipal Designation) to traditional Milanese gastronomic products: Minestrone alla Milanese, Costoletta alla Milanese, Mondeghili, Rostin Negàa, and Barbajad (<https://web.archive.org/web/20171113221440/http://mediagallery.comune.milano.it/cdm/objects/changeme:4445/datastreams/dataStream3893083610929014/content>).

In fact, the technique of cooking schnitzels in this way has roots in Italian country cuisine, where variations might involve substituting cheese with potatoes or preparing meatballs and stews in a similar manner. Argentinian variations tend to have a higher protein content. The *Milanesa a caballo*, which dates back to before World War II and has also spread to Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay, is a striking example. With fried eggs atop the breaded cutlet, this dish offered enough proteins to erase the memory of scarcity. The *Milanesa napolitana* is another protein-rich Argentinian creation where cooked ham and mozzarella are added to the fried cutlet, along with the ever-present tomato sauce. The term “napolitana” refers to the Buenos Aires restaurant that first introduced the dish in the 1940s rather than the city of Naples.

In fact, taste is a “faculty that is learned, like walking or talking”. Thus, “there is no such thing as absolute taste, but rather a taste shaped by exposure, by being immersed in a context of landscapes, aromas, [...] spices, and fleeting sensations”.<sup>28</sup> Taste is relative, conditioned by experience and habit. In other words, it is the result of an educational process involving sight, touch, colors, and the way dishes are prepared, served, and combined, as well as the palate. A plate of spaghetti Bolognese with a side of French fries immediately evokes the image of an Italian restaurant in Manhattan, with its checked tablecloths, straw-wrapped flasks, and garlands of garlic and chili peppers on the walls. This is the Italy of Italian American communities; the image of Italy that Americans expect to see and taste.

## The fascination of the flag

One of the factors that contributed to the success of Italy and Italian cuisine abroad was its image as a country “where the public dimension is invaded by the private one”.<sup>29</sup> Italian immigrants began to replicate the habits and rituals of their places of origin, blurring the boundaries between domestic and public spaces and creating a sense of continuity. The steps of a house, the pavement, the space in front of the doorway,

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28 La Cecla 1998: 104.

29 La Cecla 1998: 55.

the inner courtyards of apartment buildings, and the flowerbeds beneath windows all became the public spaces that Italian immigrants “conquered” and transformed into extensions of their private sphere. More precisely, they became hybrid spaces open to all but used for domestic functions such as making tomato sauce and preparing eggplant, onions, and all the preserves of the Mediterranean tradition.<sup>30</sup>

So domestic life was brought into the public sphere and home traditions permeated collective spaces. The scents, colors, and flavors of a distant Mediterranean life became part of the chromatic and gustatory landscape of the new world. They reshaped urban layouts and habits, altering social balances and gradually becoming a model. Over time, they were to win over the taste buds of many nations, and in the United States, Italian cuisine overcame the prejudices which once linked it to the underworld to become an emblem of healthy, flavorful, and fashionable dining. In Argentina, Italian emigrants brought, along with the actual food, also social rituals, such as Sunday pasta with family and the cult of the aperitif, with drinks like *Cinzano* or *Fernet*, and Buenos Aires became the third-largest pizza-consuming city in the world. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the top consumer was naturally Italy, but it was followed closely by the two New World Italian cities, New York and Buenos Aires. Recognizing its essential “domesticity” brings into focus the reasons for the success of Italian cuisine and the way it embodies the ideals of “good living”. Underlying *Italianness* is the idea of “home”, the search for, or reconstruction of, a lost *Heimat*, a place of nostalgia, and it has great resonance in lands built on migration.

The triangle of home, *Italianness*, and Italian food rests on food and the recipes that encapsulate a symbolic concentration of Italian identity. It reflects a way of eating that harks back to a lifestyle rooted in domestic ritual which is linked to affections, from childhood to youth and maturity, which are what give meaning to life even amidst the hardships of diaspora. Regret and nostalgia are embodied in food, just as in the smoky, desolate barrios of Buenos Aires they are embodied in the tango, the mournful dance of remembrance, longing, and nostalgia.<sup>31</sup> The Italian pioneers of the first waves of emigration have always lived joys and sorrows while

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30 Ortoleva 1992.

31 Matamori 1969.

sitting at the table. Hardworking and creative at the same time, they made a big impact on Argentine cuisine from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today Argentinian cuisine<sup>32</sup> features pasta, pizza, pesto, Mediterranean olive oil, mozzarella, cheese, and tomato-based sauces. Much of today's gastronomy, including the breaded cutlet *Milanesa*, which has little to do with Milan, is the outcome of *Cocoliche* fusion.

## A taste of home

The idea of home is ever-present in the hearts of those who find themselves far from the places they once knew, whether by choice or necessity. Returning to Ithaca was the constant longing of Ulysses, caught in an endless journey, and going home was the sole concern of the Italian *alpini* soldiers on the Russian front during the Second World War. The same nostalgia would grip young military conscripts, and in a much milder form, affects Erasmus students today. The memory of the flavors of home often travels with migrants and expatriates, tucked into their suitcases. It is interesting to ask whether a recognizable, measurable, and classifiable “taste of home” truly exists. Because of the nature of taste, which has a highly variable sensory perception, subject to continuous decomposition and re-composition, the question has no definitive answer. Tastes can be educated; shaped and refined, with the environment playing a key role. It is not simply a question of the palate. Taste education is also a social phenomenon, closely connected to surroundings.<sup>33</sup> It is in constant flux, and one of the forces driving its evolution is nomadism. Naturally, the “taste of home” is thus a fluid concept, shifting over time and varying across individuals and places. Eventually, it tends to align with the dominant flavors of the new environment. Typically, it gradually adapts, absorbing and integrating local flavors, undergoing transformation in the process. Memory, in turn, adjusts to reality, assigning the label of “home” to tastes and habits that are, in fact, the result of profound and complex hybridisation.

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32 Ducrot 2009.

33 Bourdieu 1983.

## The new nomadism

The processes of hybridisation and cultural exchange are endless. Food nomadism continues to characterize migration histories today, just as it did in the past. Human movements have always played a crucial role in the evolution of cuisine, food preferences, and the cultural rituals surrounding them.

In today's increasingly globalized world, multiple vectors of transformation intersect. On the one hand, there is the physical movement of people. UN figures show that in 2024, approximately 281 million people, 3.86% of the world population, are classified as migrants<sup>34</sup>, while nearly 1.5 billion people have traveled abroad.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, digital technology has expanded to previously unimaginable levels. Nomadism now extends into the digital realm, offering instant access to information and the ability to satisfy any curiosity with just a few clicks. In the past, Italian emigrants preserved their memories of food through recipes scrawled on scraps of paper or by consulting cookbooks, chief among them, Pellegrino Artusi's famous cookbook, almost a bible of Italian cuisine. Today, the same culinary traditions can be explored effortlessly through websites and social media, making the preservation and sharing of food culture more accessible than ever.

The European migrations of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries revealed the same underlying mental processes at play as migrations today towards Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. Similar dynamics, albeit with reversed geographical poles, characterize migration flows. Again, there is encounter and exchange between different food cultures, which are leading to new types of fusion cuisine. Tastes and techniques that are considered "exotic" today will, over time, become embedded in daily habits, giving rise to new hybridisation of tastes, aromas, and colours, just as has happened with all diaspora cuisines. Things which were once considered a novelty have already found their place in everyday life. New foods have transformed the streets of Italian towns with an unprecedented mix of

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34 <https://www.uilpa.it/onu-rapporto-sulla-migrazione-mondiale-2024/>.

35 <https://www.fanpage.it/stile-e-trend/viaggi/il-turismo-supera-i-livelli-pre-pandemia-con-14-miliardi-di-viaggiatori-nel-2024-i-paesi-piu-visitati/>.

scents and hues. Other homes, other homelands, and other memories have shed their “exotic” status, becoming an integral part of local gastronomic traditions. In time, these hybridisations, too, will solidify into tradition.

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