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# "Italian Sounding": How Soft Power Can Reverse Negative Trends & Foster Global Values <sup>[1]</sup>

Cuisine plays an important role in Italy's global image and soft power strategies. UNESCO has already recognized as intangible cultural heritage the Mediterranean diet (2013), the vine training practice in Pantelleria (2014), the Neapolitan pizzaiuolo art (2017) and truffle hunting and harvesting (2021). In 2023 Italy submitted a candidacy for Italian cuisine as a whole, focusing particularly on sustainability and biocultural diversity.

In 2024, Italian cuisine was worth a total of €251 billion (Deloitte Foodservice Market Monitor 2025). However, despite its centuries-old traditions, the global success of Italian cuisine is a relatively recent phenomenon that began in the 1980s with the boom of "Made in Italy," resulting from economic growth that made the country the fourth largest economy in the G7. The world then discovered the Italian lifestyle, with fashion, design, cultural industries, and of course, food, as its cornerstones. Prior to this, Italian cuisine around the world was essentially associated with the eating habits of immigrants and reflected the status of Italian communities abroad.

## **Growth and objectives**

Consequently, agri-food exports have significantly contributed to Italy's GDP since the 1980s. In 2014, exports were worth €34 billion; by 2018, they had reached around €42 billion. By 2023, exports were worth €63.1 billion, reaching around €70 billion in 2024 - double what they were ten years earlier.

Furthermore, this quantitative growth has gone hand in hand with an awareness of the need to improve and safeguard product quality standards in terms of both taste and health. As a result, organizations have emerged to defend the health and commercial interests of Italian products, positioning Italy at the forefront of agri-food quality protection in Europe and worldwide, as evidenced by the creation of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in Parma in 2002.

## **Critical issues**

Nevertheless, this growth has been accompanied by the emergence of a parallel market of products that are considered inauthentic and not subject to quality control. Coined in 2003, the term *Italian Sounding* was adopted in Italy to describe the use of Italian flag, words, images, geographical references, and brands that evoke Italy to promote and market products that are not actually made in Italy.

The term is often used for two phenomena: 1) the counterfeiting and falsification of brands protected by geographical indications (PGIs) or denominations of origin (PDOs), and 2) the

use of misleading trademarks that imitate or resemble original products. The first case is legally protected in Europe, but many brands are still not protected in several countries around the world. The second case is virtually impossible to address even through local regulations on registered trademarks.

The Italian government and institutions estimated the global turnover of *Italian Sounding* to be around €55 billion in 2017. In 2022, it was approximately €80 billion, and it is expected to reach around €120 billion in 2025.

Since 2010, there has been an intense and constant effort to combat *Italian Sounding* on foreign markets. This effort involves the Ministries of Foreign Trade, Agriculture, and Foreign Affairs; the Italian Trade Agency; and the Federation of Italian Food Producers. Massive information campaigns aimed at end consumers, as well as promotional events targeting sector operators, have been launched in the United States, Canada, Russia, and other countries.

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**"The 'Italian Sounding' phenomenon shows no sign of disappearing. In fact, it is increasing and causing objective damage to the Italian agri-food production sector and consumers' health."**

In 2015, the Italian government established the Permanent Observatory on Italian Sounding, and in 2019, the National Council for the Fight Against Counterfeiting and Italian Sounding. Every year, Coldiretti, Eurispes, and the Observatory publish an updated report with *Italian Sounding* figures. In 2021, US consumers founded the *Stop Italian Sounding* movement with the aim of raising awareness of these issues through social networks.

Despite this commitment and around forty years of countermeasures based on multilateral and bilateral trade agreements, the *Italian Sounding* phenomenon shows no sign of disappearing. In fact, it is increasing and causing objective damage to the Italian agri-food production sector and consumers' health.

### **Global perspective and alternative strategies**

However, analyzing tourism data from the last thirty-five years reveals a steady increase in tourist arrivals to Italy. It also shows that the estimated loss in the agri-food sector is largely offset and exceeded by the growth in tourism, driven by food and wine tourism.

In 1990, there were 84 million foreign tourists; in 2019, there were 220 million (+160%). Total tourist spending reached €100 billion in 2022 , and foreign tourist spending is expected to increase by 7% in 2025 compared to the previous year. This would bring the total value of the sector to €228.5 billion, representing 13% of Italian GDP. Additionally, foreign visitors purchased high quality food and wine products in Italy, (increasing from 26% in 2008 to 34% in 2019). Therefore, the share of spending by tourists within the total budget allocated to food and wine consumption in Italy (€195 billion in 2024) must also be added to the aforementioned tourism-related income.

Of the nearly 27 million foreign tourists surveyed in 2024, 80.4% expressed a strong positive sentiment about Italy's gastronomy. Since 2016, Italy has surpassed France and Spain as a gastronomic destination. Chinese and U.S. tourists indicated Italy as their only desired food and wine destination, while Germans ranked Italy first for a food-themed vacation.

Therefore, although awareness campaigns have not succeeded in eliminating *Italian Sounding*, they may have encouraged foreign consumers to learn more about Italian gastronomy by going to the source. Thus, despite competing with Italian agri-food exports, *Italian Sounding* appears to benefit indirectly the Italian economy as a whole.

Perhaps a more advanced soft power strategy could allow for further progress, ensuring that consumption of non-authentic products becomes the first step in discovering and approaching the original product and, more importantly, the holistic vision underlying Italian agriculture and gastronomic culture. To date, awareness campaigns have often employed a competitive and confrontational sector-specific approach. A broader, more comprehensive, proactive, and synergistic approach is probably needed. In other words, even non-authentic "Italian" products can be ultimately used to promote the original Italian brand, protect consumers' health, and ensure global sustainability, according to the One Health approach. In fact, Italian agriculture has long pursued environmental protection, from soil and water to air and humans throughout the entire food chain. To this end, Italy has promoted the rediscovery of natural production, processing, and preservation methods while utilizing the best new technologies.

The *Italian Sounding* phenomenon largely stems from the significant migration of Italians around the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These migrants began producing what are now known as "fake Italian" products. But these products are actually the result of authentic traditions and recipes that have been modified over generations adapting to the realities of their new countries. These communities may be the first to advocate rediscovering the original products.

Some private groups in the industry have begun to take this approach, building informal campaigns with popular testimonials that connect foreign consumers with Italy. One successful example of this strategy is San Pellegrino's partnership with Stanley Tucci, star of the TV series *Stanley Tucci: Searching for Italy*, which explore Italian regional food, culture, and traditions. Tucci's program has proved a formidable worldwide promotional tool for authentic Italian cuisine and quality products.

## Conclusions

Targeted and non-aggressive communication strategies can transform obvious competition into cooperation, from which all parties can benefit. In the case of *Italian Sounding*, co-opting foreign manufacturers of non-original products could promote an improvement in their quality standards and profitability and, on a social level, it could strengthen their identity. Moreover, an increase in turnover would be advantageous not just for Italy but also for other nations. Finally and most importantly, such an approach would raise awareness of the need for sustainability in every aspect of production, benefiting consumers worldwide.

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