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3rd Place Research Paper: Cultural Attitudes Towards Ethnic Cuisine in Italy

Rachel Berns

Chapman University, rberns@chapman.edu

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3rd Place Research Paper: Cultural Attitudes Towards Ethnic Cuisine in Italy

Comments

Rachel Berns won Third Place in the 2024 Kevin and Tam Ross Undergraduate Research Prize for her [essay about cultural attitudes toward ethnic cuisine in Italy](#).. This essay is the original scholarship that emerged from that research.

Cultural Attitudes Towards Ethnic Cuisine in Italy

Rachel Berns

Chapman University Departments of Food Science and Italian Studies

FSN 309/509: Topics in Food, Diet, and Culture

Dr. Anuradha Prakash and Dr. Sara Mattavelli

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Abstract

Italy has become a common “landing country” for many European and Asian immigrants, creating a perception of invasion that has led to cultural reactionism masked in the reinforcement of “traditional cuisine.” For so-called traditional foods to endure, they must continually be reinvented, bearing different meanings and social values throughout time and space while accumulating rich, cultural baggage that serves as a powerful marker of identity in a given society. This paper explores the role of traditional cuisine in Italian national identity and pride, and the subsequent historical culinary antagonism maintained in widespread attitudes toward ethnic cuisine in Italy. Through an analysis of primary and secondary literature, complemented by qualitative field observations in the Italian cities of Perugia and Modena, several instances of culinary discrimination are discussed within the political, social, cultural, and historical complexities of preserving tradition while also accommodating diversity, highlighting an interplay between nostalgia and xenophobia that we can almost taste. Key factors such as food legislation, the tourism industry, and evolving attitudes among young generations are considered to yield a dynamic picture of the current perceptions of ethnic cuisine in Italy. Despite lingering biases, there is hope for a future of culinary coexistence and integrative celebration of non-Italian foods in Italian culture, driven by young individuals’ openness to diverse tastes and traditions.

Cultural Attitudes Towards Ethnic Cuisine in Italy

The United States, being the ascribed melting pot it is, benefits from a vibrant fusion of cuisines coming from across the globe in the absence of a strong national American cuisine, and these diverse dining options are widely accessible throughout the country. Italy, however, is a country historically known for its delicious culinary mastery, and the national pride that is felt throughout toward authentic Italian cuisine. While this might be very attractive for visitors coming from outside of Italy, it may not be conducive to a diverse national diet for Italian residents, like the familiar diet we commonly see in the U.S.

This curiosity surrounding the Italian diet arose back in 2016 during a personal vacation to Italy, and was explored intently during a ten-day travel course, researching the cultural attitudes towards ethnic cuisine in Italy both in modern day as well as their progression across history. This culminated in an exploration of the key factors influencing the perception and success of ethnic cuisine in Italian culture with an emphasis on understanding what these factors might communicate about deeper truths of Italian history. I hoped this research would illuminate connections through interdisciplinary political, social, cultural, and historical lenses that contextualized the reality of food culture seen in Italy today.

Through the integration of a general literature review and analysis as well as what mimicked a qualitative case study utilizing field observations in the cities of Modena and Perugia, well-informed assumptions could be made regarding the perception and success of ethnic cuisine within Italian food culture.

The Italian Way

It's nearly impossible to ignore the striking idealization of Italian food and subsequent reinforcement of national pride that is felt throughout legislature, cookbooks, and so many more

avenues. Pantries are full of politics that infiltrate the stories that emerge from them, using compelling narratives that “[gratify] our deepest nostalgia for connection with the earth and a taste for authentic experiences” (Mikulak, 2013), pushing eating to be more politically charged and emotionally vested than ever before. This is seen with minimal subtlety, wherein messages that reflect a culinary war against non-Italian food have been present in written documentation for years. A nearly thirty-year-old Umbrian cookbook puts it ever so bluntly, asserting that “Italian restaurants and good gastronomic connoisseurs, tired of... strangely exotic cuisines, turn with correct attention to foods that are healthy, simple, and genuine, Umbrian cuisine, strong with ancient memories as well as rustic nobility” (Grassetti & Breschi, 1994). This beautifully illustrates the powerful dichotomy that has been created between Italian and non-Italian food: right versus wrong, good versus bad, healthy versus unhealthy, genuine versus phony, noble versus lowly. The chasm between the two contributes to a sense of “otherness,” in which both cooks and consumers are explicitly encouraged to put up the barricades against types of complicated and over-elaborate (non-Italian) dishes - the others (Nowak, 2014b).

The distinction between Italian and “other” has paved the way for individuals, companies, and even entire regions to claim stake over certain meals and food preparation processes, sometimes to extreme lengths, however it is gotten away with by being masked as a remnant of nostalgia. A novel on food and its interplay with Italian society spends nearly fifty pages discussing how to construct food “the Italian way,” outlining harvesting and production techniques that are not inherently exclusive to Italy. It does so in such a way that makes the reader feel like the supposed Italian way is the correct, or best, way to cook and eat, but then goes on to mock how “Italian food has become fetishized in Italy as well as globally. What is on one hand an appreciation for genuine difference (and quality) can be and is easily transformed

into a mad rush for a symbol that may not have anything to do with the object it symbolizes” (Harper & Faccioli, 2010). There is a point where a strong sense of pride and national identity becomes harmful. What likely started as an innocent love for Italian culture and cuisine has warped into instances of ostracization and exclusivity, excused by a sense of nostalgia, that is slowly edging further and further from the values that are supposedly trying to be preserved.

The Smell of Xenophobia

In recent years, Italy has emerged as one of the primary landing countries for immigrants from outside of Europe. Cultural reactionism has been ignited by the perception of invasion, and one of its several manifestations is an effort to support and retain “traditional” cuisine. Some of the most severe instances of this are found in laws and regulations that proscribe and condemn foreign food in the name of uplifting local dishes.

Without a doubt, Middle Eastern cuisines (and people) have been under some of the harshest attacks with regard to social and legal expulsion. An ordinance was passed in 2009 in the Tuscan city of Lucca which declared that in order “to protect the [local] cooking tradition and the architectural, cultural, structural, historic and décor-related typicalness, no new businesses [were] allowed whose activity comes from a different ethnic tradition” (Magrassi, 2010). Everything down to a restaurant's decor was under legal scrutiny when it came to ethnic cuisine; this was about more than the food; it was about the people and the cultures they brought with them which were interpreted as a threat. This clause is no longer active, however a requirement still stands that every new restaurant in Lucca’s historic center serves at least one traditional Luccan dish, regardless of the type of restaurant. While the city could not be accommodating to its non-Italian residents, they must continue to be accommodating of the city by diluting their own traditions.

These restrictions came following an explosion of restaurants and food stands offering Mediterranean kebabs, beginning in 2001, and specifically “anti-kebab” sentiments still remain, even more recently with the current Mayor of Florence warning his constituents that Asian food stalls are watering down Italian culture (Danovich, 2017). This magnitude of mistrust in and disdain toward foreign food furthers the notion of strong nationalist attitudes that trickle down from administrations to populations, deterring individuals from seeking out ethnic cuisine. However, ironically, none of the ordinances that have been colloquially coined as “anti-kebab laws” actually explicitly mention kebab (Nowak, 2013). Instead, they continue to play into the black-and-white dichotomies hidden in other means, such as health laws and promoting adherence to traditional food, in order to restrict the expansion of kebab shops and other ethnic restaurants. Cittadella, a northern Italian town, did just this in 2011, passing a ban on the sale of “foul-smelling” foods, claiming foreign dishes (primarily kebabs) are not suited for their historic center due to the smell they give off, and going on further within the ordinance to target dishes that are left in the open for a long time after cooking (Welle, 2011). With each new restriction, the message becomes clearer: an attack on foreign food is only scratching the surface of the metaphorical attack on foreigners and immigrants.

Despite how obvious some of those examples may be, those are the more subtle of the bunch. Along with the 2009 Luccan rulings, Italy’s agricultural minister, Luca Zaia, publicly backed the combative raiding of non-Italian restaurants’ menus and supplies, reinforcing that Italy must “continue to block the arrival... of all foods which have nothing to do with [their] extremely rich agricultural heritage, and protect... the health of Italians” (Kington, 2019). Yet again, a glaring juxtaposition between the good in Italy and the bad in everything else: xenophobia translated into culinary reactionism.

Fallacious Foods and Traditions

For foods deemed traditional to be saved across time and space, they must continually be reinvented. Polenta is a dish often considered to be traditionally Italian, which has borne a great deal of history, and in doing so, has adopted different meanings. In 2002, it took on a new meaning from Italy's separatist Northern League as the centerpiece of a slogan that read "Yes to Polenta, No to Couscous: Proud of our Traditions." With polenta's roots being of Muslim origin and introduced to Italy by Jews (Artusi, 2003), and couscous being an overtly comparable dish, this ad reveals how traditional food regularly necessitates selective remembering as well as some degree of intentional culinary amnesia (Nowak et al., 2020). However, it goes beyond that, underlining the abuses of labeling foods as traditional as a means of pushing conservative agendas, with couscous being a very thinly-veiled metaphor for Muslim immigrants. Here we get a glimpse into an important conflict between Italian tradition and nostalgia for the past (a time without such perceived foreign invasion), all wrapped up in symbolic culinary discrimination (Naccarato et al., 2017).

It might not seem inherently outlandish to want to preserve tradition, but what's of potentially greater interest is whether or not authenticity can even exist in a tradition that is invented or imagined. Both the pizza margherita and torta al testo have checkered histories teetering between folklore and fakelore despite their regard as historically withstanding traditional dishes (Nowak, 2014a). Some will even argue that there is no such thing as Italian food; following its discovery, new food products from the Americas were incorporated into European diets by being translated into common dishes (Nowak, 2014b), and culinary borrowing has occurred over centuries, absorbing remnants of Roman, Arab, African, and several other cuisines (Last, 2022). There is no shame in this, as cuisines across virtually every country are

dynamic and evolved, but to allow a misguided and borderline hypocritical sense of history and tradition to be a mode of ostracization and discrimination through food is where shame enters the conversation.

For better or for worse, traditions are passed down and shape habits for years to come. In *Representing Italy Through Food*, a student studying abroad in Milan shares a story from her final night in Italy. She prepared an elaborate Chinese feast for her host family, only to be questioned about what their children would eat. She noted that there was plenty of food for everyone, and was met with the response: “Children don’t eat Chinese food.” She called this her “first encounter with Italian food culture - real and imagined - that was rife with questions of impenetrability and permeability, notions of authenticity, health, and hygiene” (Naccarato et al., 2017). When it comes to a collective national Italian identity, “traditional” food practices are stressed in many sectors of life, priming children and their culinary choices beginning in their youth and cementing the network of links connecting food, nation, and Italian identity (Tuchler, 2015). Our relationships to food are emotionally charged markers of identity, and we will discuss shortly how this shapes our attitudes and perceptions in ways we might not actively realize.

The “When in Rome” Mentality

Shifting away from the troubled history of the kebab and toward the riches of the ravioli, food is one of the most crucial components and economic drivers of Italy’s tourist industry, especially in urban areas, bringing in nearly \$34M in revenue in 2020 (*Italy Culinary Tourism Market*, n.d.). Given that most tourists find traditional (or perhaps more accurately worded, local) cuisine more attractive when visiting a place like Italy, which is notorious for signature and delicious dishes, it’s not surprising that there has been no overwhelming financial need for governments or corporations to display public support for ethnic restaurants. I felt this in more

instances during my trip than I can count, in conversations with classmates who were shocked by some of my meal choices as part of my field research, and who claimed they refused to eat anything other than Italian food while in Italy. I don't mean to argue that they are right or wrong, but it does reinforce this notion of a food hierarchy that supports Italian cuisine above its counterparts. This very well may seep into the attitudes of the general population, hindering them from buying into or even desiring the idea of a more diversified diet.

That isn't to say that no single tourist ever comes to Italy and craves some sushi, but it seems to all come back to how the individual's culinary choices were conditioned way back when. When it came to myself and the few other students who began to desire anything other than pizza and pasta some time into the trip, we all had in common a very ethnically diverse diet back in the States, which was not shared with those who abstained from anything non-Italian. These dietary preferences and eating patterns are rooted in our exposure growing up, which is why language like "Children don't eat Chinese food" is more impactful than we realize, and has likely already contributed to how many Italians view ethnic cuisine today.

McDonald's, while I wouldn't exactly label it as an ethnic cuisine, represents an interesting intersection between where tourism and non-Italian food meet at an agreeable place. While there was opposition to the chain when its first store opened in Italy's capital in 1986, it's come to have a frequented consumer base even by Italian residents at nearly 700 locations country-wide (Giacomella, 2021). There is a striking contrast between the warmer welcome of McDonald's, arguably a win for American consumerism, and the harsher efforts to keep out culturally rich cuisines which symbolize a deeper reality of the settling and integration of immigrants and other foreign entities.

Peering into Italy's Green Heart

It only took about a week in Perugia to find plenty of hints that queued me into the outlined contextual history. One of the most prominent is Corso Garibaldi, which is a street highly concentrated with ethnic restaurants, though very tucked away in an unsuspecting alley. Taking a stroll down the alley was a disheartening experience, seeing mostly empty tables, and the single Chinese restaurant with some liveliness only appeared to have customers of Asian descent. My eyes perked up at the sight of two restaurants, African and Mesopotamian, right next to each other, as these are not cuisines I frequently see in California. But upon closer squints, it seemed as if nearly half of their menus were comprised of Italian-style pizzas, which makes you wonder if that's necessary to draw appeal or maintain business - compromising their own authenticity. I found this to be the case at the few kebab shops I passed by in various locations too; they all offered the expected shawarmas, falafels, etc., but never failed to have at least one pizza-by-the-slice option on the menu.

Probably the most striking characteristic about Corso Garibaldi was not its emptiness, but rather the implications of its location. Not only was it hard to even find or see, but it was stationed immediately next to the city's University for Foreigners. Maybe this was coincidental, however, I felt it implied some very interesting things about who is expected to frequent those restaurants, and creating this separation between the city and anything else perceived as foreign - the "other" - which gets shoved together in a corner. But I can't blame the lack of customers entirely on location; even the two Mexican and Irish restaurants that were much more central and visible in the city center never seemed to be booming with business.

On my final day in town, I struck up a conversation with an English-speaking, older gentleman at one of the farmers market pasta stands, who told me he'd lived in Perugia his whole life. After a few minutes of lovely chatting, I divulged to him that I was really craving some

ramen or sushi, and asked if he knew of any good spots in the area. His tone and demeanor immediately shifted, and he told me he didn't "eat that foreigner stuff." This was only one man, and it's an extreme example, but it gives some insight into some of the attitudes that do still linger, especially in more rural areas, regarding both foreign food and the people associated with it. Interactions like that make it a lot less surprising to see how most of the non-Italian restaurants in the city are outfitted with much more English signage than their counterparts, again, suggesting something about catering to who their primary customers are - i.e. visitors, rather than local residents. Thinking back to the influence that upbringing has on later culinary choices, it also wasn't shocking to see that most of the customers in the few kebab shops I stepped into were seemingly below the age of twenty-five, as the more outdated, close-minded views resided mainly with older residents.

Outside of Corso Garibaldi, finding ethnic restaurants in Perugia can be quite a task. I spent nearly half an hour scouring travel guides for restaurants of all sorts of cuisines only to come up with very lackluster results. And even in the few businesses that did populate, I saw even more glimpses of bias in the reviews. The ethnic restaurants were flooded with very strong comments, such as "please don't eat here... weird food... disappointing" (*The 10 Best Restaurants in Perugia*, n.d.), whereas even reviews on Italian restaurants that outlined poor experiences were accompanied by 5-star ratings. Research has corroborated additional discrepancies between the perception of Italian and non-Italian food, noting that there are significantly greater perceptions of risk associated with consuming ethnic cuisine, even when unfounded (Mascarello et al., 2017), with some of the riskiest foods perceived as being of Japanese origin, still without concrete reasoning as to why (Fanelli & Nocera, 2018).

I witnessed a similar sense of bias one evening when a group of peers and I were mingling; half ordered pizza from a local restaurant and the other half ordered from a nearby Mediterranean spot. Everyone with pizza noted that it was not very enjoyable, but continued to finish their whole meals and did not complain at all. On the other hand, the individuals who got the Mediterranean food were significantly more vocal and upset about the quality of their meals, so much so that they didn't finish even half of them. This isn't to say it's impossible for ethnic food to taste subpar or that we should criticize Italian food more than we do, but it is to highlight how there seems to be this ideological cushion around Italian food in which we have a lot more grace for it, whereas ethnic food faces much more unforgiving criticism. These whispers of neophobia are like an aftertaste of a long history of culinary war, and continue to slow the hybridization of consumption patterns that are seen unfolding in other parts of the world (Mascarello et al., 2020).

A Future of Culinary Coexistence

While the last nine pages have been far from optimistic, there is still much hope to be held for a welcomed integration of ethnic cuisine into Italian culture, and instances of this are already taking place across the country. Young Italians, in particular, are driving the renewal of food tastes and traditions, and distancing themselves from the traditionalism that has marked the past (Giacomella, 2021). In terms of sheer numbers, ethnic food sales in Italy jumped 93% between 2007 and 2020, and the number of foreign entrepreneurs in the catering sector increased by 42% between 2010 and 2014, with an estimation of over 50,000 ethnic restaurants in Italy today (Redazione, 2020). The statistics themselves are fantastic, but it's even more rewarding when you can feel it in the air, such as throughout Modena's Truck'N'Food festival, where people were lining up with excitement to get their hands on some arepas, spam musubi, or

something in between. Similarly, an employee at the Persian restaurant “Persepolis” in Modena shared a very positive outlook on Italians today and their eagerness to try food from other cultures, including Persian, even sharing how far she and her friends regularly travel to have some of their favorite ethnic restaurants.

Sicily is a prime example of a place where culinary integration has been happening seamlessly for years with influence from historic Arab rule and North African immigration beginning as early as the 10th century (Zaccardelli & Cohen, 2021). A Sicilian mayor referred to the region as a “mosaic,” which has come to fruition in a number of fusion dishes staple to Sicilian diets, like *maafe*, *arancini*, and many more (Steavenson, 2018). Sicily continues to thrive as a unique multicultural stew of North African ingredients, Italian techniques, and a Sicilian flair, serving as a role model for how tradition can be enriched, rather than challenged, by foreign influences. It’s no doubt that in years to come, especially in larger and urban cities, the trends toward a globalized diet will flourish and ethnic restaurants will find greater celebration and success.

Limitations and Unanswered Questions

With the open-endedness of a topic like this, the research is never ending, as well as the list of limitations when conducting it. This paper presents a non-exhaustive list of factors that may affect the state of ethnic cuisine in Italy - it is by no means all-encompassing of the dynamic layers at play across the entire country. This is also something that is transforming with each day, so my experience in May 2023 may be drastically different from what reality will look like in May 2025. As alluded to already, there were more than a few contradictions between my own expectations for this research, existing literature, and the observations I collected, which simply serves as a necessary reminder that this trip was far from enough time to get a completely

thorough picture of ethnic cuisine in an entire city or region, let alone should that be generalized to an entire country's culture as a whole.

And still, questions remain that would help fill in additional gaps in this massive puzzle. How does the ethnic makeup of the country compare to the number and distribution of ethnic restaurants within it? Who actually runs the ethnic restaurants - could there be Italian ownership that confounds my arguments? These, and about a hundred more questions, require deeper exploration before any sort of conclusions may be made on the matter.

Final Thoughts

If anything can be known with certainty from this encompassing experience, it's that food is not simply something to taste and satisfy our stomachs; it carries with it rich history and cultural baggage that represent its past and present homes. Likewise, many of the current cultural attitudes towards ethnic cuisine in Italy can be traced to echoes of xenophobia and its subsequent culinary reactionism, however, glimpses of integration and acceptance, especially among younger generations and in urban areas, reflect recent trends toward globalization and suggest an exciting, and delicious, future of culinary coexistence.

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