

What does Italian mean to you?

Alimentare Barilla, Italy's No. 1 pasta brand and a considerable presence on American tables, was facing numerous dilemmas at the start of 2003. Pasta shelves were bulging with multiple look-alike brands. Commoditization was rampant and the only way to catch consumer attention was through cut-throat price wars at the supermarket shelf.

Pasta, along with Italian cuisine in general, was losing its cachet. Restaurant chains were touting "all-you-can-eat spaghetti" and bottomless gorging. The typical "heavy user" in consumers' imagination was Tony Soprano stuffing Italian gangster grub down his gullet without regard to time, temperature or taste. The television tyrant's wife Carmela was using manicotti to seduce her priest.

The meaning of pasta as an economical and nutritious meal was also changing. The anti-carbohydrate fad pointed its finger at pasta as a contributor to American obesity. New ethnic foods, including Asian and Middle Eastern specialties, captured the attention of healthy eaters.

Barilla, supported by its agency Young & Rubicam, had to reverse the image of its own products and distinguish the brand on crowded shelves. Ideas were needed about how to extend the line and associate the brand with other long-term trends, including America's continuing preoccupation with health and fitness.

Moreover, as Italy's No. 1 brand, Barilla had to learn how to leverage that equity to its clear advantage against both other imported and domestic Italian food brands.

Barilla engaged our firm, QualiData, to help it understand Italianness in the U.S. and to recommend ways to solve a list of dilemmas. These challenges included how to distinguish the brand in an injured category while responding to new needs for innovative foods. We decided that the objectives of this strategic marketing study called for trian-

gulation, a mix of research approaches designed to yield multiple layers of consumer understanding. The study outcomes generated a series of ideas that have driven the brand forward.

Researchers use a mix of qualitative methods to help Barilla learn how Americans view Italian food



By Hy Mariampolski
and Sharon Wolf

Editor's note: Hy Mariampolski is managing director and Sharon Wolf is managing director at QualiData Research Inc., Brooklyn, N.Y. They can be reached at 718-499-4690 or at hy@qualidataresearch.com or sharon@qualidataresearch.com.

This article describes some of the steps we took to gain critical insights; demonstrates how ideas were turned into actionable strategic and tactical recommendations; and illustrates the benefits of a multi-methodological approach for qualitative studies driven by challenging objectives.

Exploring Italianness

Our discovery process and related strategic insights had to succeed among those who were fully informed about Italian culture as well as among mainstream consumers. Thus, each phase of this qualitative study was designed to better understand how ideas about what makes something Italian influence consumer behavior. Our research plan was to gain ideas from consumers who are intimately tied to Italianness and then assess how well those concepts “sell” to the general market.

- *Media content analysis*

To assess the current range of images and ideas that were percolating about Italy, we conducted a semiotic analysis of ads, articles and reviews in consumer magazines that addressed Italian style, cuisine, travel and culture. Semiotics is a form of research practice that interprets implicit or hidden meanings and messages. Magazines reviewed for the content analysis included: *Travel & Leisure*, *Gourmet*, *Martha Stewart Living*, *Food & Wine*, *La Cucina Italiana*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Elle*.

- *Expert depth interviews*

We sought the advice of undisputed experts who have established their careers on the basis of cultural affinity toward Italy, including a highly-recognized Italian chef, a marketing director for a major Italian clothing brand, an author and food editor specializing in Italian food, a restaurant critic for a major metropolitan newspaper and an Italian studies professor.

- *Life history interviews*

We spoke with leading-edge consumers – early adopters who

have strong ties to Italianness through travel, language study and consumption of Italian arts and culture, including a mix of Americans with and without Italian heritage. These three-to-four-hour depth psychological interviews employed projective techniques including consumer collages and sensory stimuli.

- *Ethnographic home visits*

We observed dinner preparations and meal consumption among informed consumers in New York and San Francisco. These contextual encounters brought us into the homes and hearts of Americans to help us understand what made meals Italian and why. All ethnography participants normally cooked Italian food at home at least once a week and it represented a favored mealtime choice.

- *Street intercept interviews*

These were conducted among mainstream consumers who were visiting the Little Italy neighborhood of New York City and the North Beach Italian neighborhood in San Francisco.

- *Extended creativity groups*

This final step involved testing hypotheses for various communication routes among mainstream American consumers. The copy and imagery under evaluation were derived from insights generated by the earlier phases of the study. Mainstream consumers discussed their perceptions of Italian cuisine and evaluated image boards representing different ways of positioning Italianness.

Diet and culture

Dietary habits are central components of culture. Nutrition and sustenance are not only sensory in nature. The manners in which we select, prepare and consume foods are tied to the habits and customs that define a people and their place in the universe. Culinary tastes are based in time and location. Eating preferences are ingrained early and imprinted within the deepest core of our brains. The foods that we

value and enjoy are linked to circumstances of availability, tradition, self-image and cultural transference. Hunger is biological, but satiation occurs following a complex process in which raw materials are fashioned into culturally desirable meals.

Understanding the cultural production of taste and food culture is essential for marketers. A meal becomes delicious and desirable within a set of ideas about the components and circumstances of consumption. Knowing the cultural underpinnings of food can help marketers make decisions about how to develop and position products that speak to consumers' ideals, emotions and fantasies. As this study demonstrates, what Americans perceive and believe about Italy and its cuisine influence what they buy, cook and eat.

Eating the Italian myth

Italy provokes a mix of sentimentalism, contempt and aspiration in the American mind. As a land of immigrants, the United States both honors and disdains the heritages of its component peoples. Like other ethnicities, Italians often are dismissed in jokes and stereotypes. Nevertheless, Italy stands out as closer to the American heart and soul than other national cultures. America takes pride in having absorbed Italian foods and arts, preserved as a sentimental collective memory particularly among Italian-Americans, the majority of which are now up to five or six generations removed from their home country. (For an overview of the interaction between immigrant absorption and food styles, see, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, by Hasia R. Diner [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001].)

Studying the forms of Italian sensibility leads to the conclusion that there is no single model of Italian authenticity. It changes as observers move across regions, ages

and the social scale.

Among average Americans, Italianness often finds expression in music from the golden age of song in the '40s and '50s - Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Perry Como - animated by scenes of Venetian gondoliers, statuettes of Michaelangelo's David, and the Leaning Tower of Pisa. A certain kind of sentimental Catholicism also plays into this ethos; an eventual trip to the Vatican, perhaps with a glimpse of the Pope on a Sunday morning in St. Peter's Square, animates people's dreams and aspirations.

The underside of this mythology finds expression in Americans' continuing fascination the Mafia and the popular TV series *The Sopranos*. In the media, slang from the streets of turn-of-the century Naples or Palermo ("*stugats*") is perpetuated as authentically Italian. A kind of brutal hyper-masculinity, represented by characters played Robert De Niro and James Gandolfini, for example, typify American ideas about what it means to be Italian.

Gastronomically, this Italian-American myth finds continued expression in the foods celebrated in Italian street fairs, pizza stands and the Little Italy restaurants in cities across the U.S. Here you find such favorites as fettucine alfredo and spaghetti and clam sauce, lasagna and manicotti smothered in tomato sauce along with pizza, bottles of Chianti, greasy zeppole or cannoli followed by a sweet cappuccino - all celebrated by Americans as creating an Italian experience.

At the same time, we discovered that there is another level of this Italian myth, among highly educated Americans, that celebrates the arts - the operas of Verdi, Puccini and Rossini, Palladian architecture, Dante, and, of course, Italian painting and sculpture. Renaissance and Baroque artists, such as Raphael, Botticelli, Bernini and even the modernists de Chirico and Modigliani are all admired. Upscale

consumers often flock to language classes to better understand operas sung in Italian and dream of an eventual trip to the Uffizi, a peek at Da Vinci's *Last Supper* in Milan, explorations across Rome and the Vatican. These lovers of Italy and Italianness populate Italian film festivals to recall the classics of neorealism and the cinema of Fellini, Passolini and Bertolucci.

There is a higher food sensibility associated with these Americans - a disdain for "red-sauce" Italian foods and a preference for the cuisines of Northern and coastal Italy. These consumers typically maintain connoisseurship about the wines of the Piedmont, can recognize the subtleties of a delicate gorgonzola cheese, and prefer a prosciutto made in Parma to any other aged ham.

On another level, fantasies of Italy populate Americans' dreams in their ongoing search for authenticity and the natural, organic ways of living, loving and eating. One cultural expression of this ideal includes the fantasy of owning a second home in rural Italy as celebrated by Frances Mayes' *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Gastronomically, this involves a search for purity, localism, small-scale production and other ideas associated with the worldwide "slow food" movement.

Moving further up the social scale, our semiotic analysis confirms that Italy represents high style to Americans as expressed in fashion, interior design and home furnishings. Clothing and accessories branded by Armani, Versace, Missoni, Dolce & Gabbana, Prada and Gucci convey status to their wearers. In food, these Americans follow the celebrity chef of the moment and the canons of Italian haute cuisine. In America, celebrity chefs like Lidia Bastianich, Paul Bertolli and Mario Batali can boast a following that rivals any sports figure. Italy, in this context, may also represent something desirable, ideal, perhaps unachievable by anyone but the hyper-rich.

Comforting antidote

Our content and semiotic analysis of images of Italy and Italian food in the media revealed that, for Americans, Italian food and culture stand as a comforting antidote to the angst of living in the modern world, including post-9-11 anxiety and the fast pace of life exacerbated by the speed of the Internet.

Our study also found that a range of expressions and imagery around the idea of Italianness could motivate Americans to place a higher value on the consumption of Italian foods. These ideas include:

- Evoking modernity and innovation while maintaining authenticity toward a timeless landscape and tradition. While not dwelling on the past, when antiquity is linked to modernity, the message is that the featured ingredients and cuisine are authentic to their roots in Italy.

"Italy is about history, tradition. There's a lot of beauty in the countryside, in the geography and of the people."

- A relaxed and convivial style of eating. Consumer memories and stock of knowledge revealed that Italianness implies not only the sensory aspects of the cuisine but also the manner in which meals are consumed. Socializing in a relaxed context with friends and family is the basis of a deep connection to Italian eating.

"I would describe an Italian experience as being laidback, easygoing and full of life."

- The best ingredients. Regardless of whether the focus was on fashion or foods, Italianness implies attention to components and ingredients. Only the best is good enough. Making meals Italian also requires use of particular ingredients, including olive oil, garlic, balsamic vinegar and other components that form the chef's palette of Italian meals.

- Making meals Italian also requires an emphasis on simplicity

and naturalness. In home décor and accessories, Italy connotes a limited range of textures, materials and colors – stone, textured surfaces, earthy colors as backgrounds such as yellow ochre and neutral colors such as black, beige and tan in fabrics. Similarly, in foods, a limited range of ingredients, in which flavors and textures are permitted to remain intact without being hidden or masked, suggest that an item is authentically Italian.

“Good Italian food pronounces the flavors. You taste all the ingredients.”

“It’s about taking a couple of ingredients and a couple of flavors and really featuring them. It’s about presenting them at their best, their most aromatic and flavorful.”

Americans consider Italian cuisine to be versatile; meals are quick and easy to prepare, are made from simple, easily available and affordable ingredients, and can be enjoyed by both adults and children. Moreover, everyone agrees that Italian cuisine is suitable for serving to family as well as guests and is enjoyed by Americans from all ethnic backgrounds.

“I don’t know a single person who doesn’t like Italian food. With Italian food you can never go wrong.”

Regional discovery

By inviting consumers to evaluate several communication routes, we discovered that “regional discovery” was the one idea that could encapsulate all of these positive aspects of Italian cuisine and could bring the brand forward. To provoke curiosity and engage consumers to look at Italian foods in a new, fresh way required the client to emphasize varied local and regional foods. Home cooks were

eager to embrace special recipes from Tuscany, the Piedmont, Emilia-Romagna and other centers of Italian high cuisine.

Regionalism spoke to consumers’ aspirations to try authentic but unfamiliar dishes. It placed Italian meals on a par with other national cuisines that Americans were encountering during meal-time adventures. Moreover, this idea allowed Barilla’s product developers to encompass lighter fare – the Northern and coastal cuisines that shoppers were connecting with currently-favored dietary outcomes. Additionally, since the best ingredients were perceived as originating “close to the source,” it gave Barilla permission to introduce novel ingredients while keeping those such as garlic, olive oil and vegetables that Americans already associated with healthy eating. This context allowed Barilla to introduce pastas made with alternative grains and other meal components that were capturing American’s interest.

In terms of promotional imagery, the regionalism concept opened up a range of locations well beyond Venetian gondoliers. The Italian regional reality comprises mountain landscapes and seaside towns, rolling hills and Palladian piazzas, modern urban landscapes as well as traditional villages.

Our study also discovered a gap that could be filled by Barilla as the ultimate authority on Italian cuisine. Consequently, the ideas emerging from this study have been incorporated into new products from Barilla – including the award-winning Barilla Plus line – as well as the creation of a branded Web site, Academia Barilla

(www.academiabarilla.com), which has become the focus of re-introducing and educating Americans about the uniqueness of regional Italian cuisine.

Create new ways

Our mission was to reverse disparaging stereotypes and to secure marketing insights that promote consumption of Barilla in America. Digging deeply into the meaning of authenticity and seeking positive and constructive aspects of the national mythologies helped us create new ways for Americans to appreciate Italian meals.

We discovered that “authentically Italian” refers to both food and a relaxed, convivial style of eating. It seeks a dialogue between the old and new, classic and contemporary, which communicates timelessness and heritage. Authenticity emphasizes naturalness – texture and colors as well as special ingredients such as olive oil, garlic and tomatoes. Simplicity is another key to Italianness – being able to appreciate every constituent ingredient.

Most importantly, we discovered that ideas about regionalism fed into Americans’ positive regard for the foods of Italy. It was not helpful to present an undifferentiated Italian character but, instead, to emphasize local specialties and ingredients as the hallmarks of connoisseurship.

Overall, analysis of food culture reveals the context for what consumers perceive as desirable in the taste and the experience of eating. This, in turn, can generate ideas for new product development, updated branding and powerful communications imagery and messages. | Q