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## Voices in Italian Americana

a literary and cultural review

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a literary and cultural review

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# ANNOUNCEMENT ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION BOOK AWARD

The Italian American Studies Association announces the Italian American Studies Association Book Award offered even numbered years for a scholarly work and odd numbered years for a creative work. The next award of \$500 will be presented to an outstanding Italian-American creative work published between June 1, 2015 and June 1, 2017. A nominated book must be drama, fiction, memoir, mixed-genre, poetry, or prose, predominantly on an Italian-American theme or subject matter, and primarily in English. (Edited collections are not eligible.) Nominations may be made by a publisher or a member in good standing of the IASA. Three copies of the nominated work must be received by June 15, 2017. Please send to: IASA Book Award, John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, 25 West 43rd Street, 17th Floor, New York, NY 10036. There is no entry fee. Copies, however, will not be returned. The award will be presented at our meeting in Washington, DC. (The recipient need not be present.)

## Selling Italian Food in the USA: Pride, History, and Tradition<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays Italian sounding products are a controversial issue between Italy and USA. There is a serious on-going discussion relative to business agreements between Europe and the United States of America, for example, the Transatlantic Treaty of International Partnership (TTIP) that is a proposed trade agreement between the European Union and the United States, with the aim of promoting trade and multilateral economic growth. The point of controversy between Italy and the USA starts from the definition of DOP and IGP products and their protection. The term Denominazione di Origine Protetta [Protected Denomination of Origin], better known with the acronym DOP, is a legal trademark of European Food Protection for products whose peculiar qualitative characteristics depend on the territory where they are made. The term refers to an indication of the geographical area where products are produced. The term Indicazione Geografica Protetta [Protected Geographical Indication], known with the acronym IGP, refers to a trademark of origin attributed by the European Union to food products for which a determined quality, or any other characteristic, partially depends on the geographical origin of raw material, and whose production, transformation and processing occurs in a specific geographical area.

Our first point is not the economic or the political question about Italian foods advertised as authentic Italian food in the North American context, but, first of all, to analyze how Italian food products are advertised to consumers living in the USA and, secondly, how so-called 'Italian sounding' products are presented in this context. The starting point of our analysis is cultural, that is, we want to outline how in advertising the 'nationality' of the product is strictly correlated to a specific idea about that specific culture (in our case Italian culture). Therefore, the idea is to analyze how food, an important element of any culture but even more of Italian culture famous for its way of eating and drinking, is connected to a determinate cultural representation. Food is advertised through links with a specific idea of what is Italian, 'Italianness,' and Italian culture and traditions. Our second point is still a cultural one, but taken one step further, that is to say, how the sale of Italian food in the USA is clearly thought for the American taste. This is quite a basic idea in international marketing and advertising strategies, but what interests us is how the success of a product abroad is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>The essay has been thought and discussed by the two authors. Sections 1, 2 and 3 have been written by Eleonora Federici; sections 4 and 5 by Andrea Bernardelli.

constructed through the use of stereotypes, positively connoted, but stereotypes nonetheless. What we want to analyze is if, notwithstanding the non Italian origin of the product, these goods are the result of the Italian-American culture and gastronomical tradition, that is to say, these products are more a product of Italian-American culture than fake versions of Italian ones. Italian-American food is a culinary tradition of its own, a sort of foreign branch of the Italian one. It is the gastronomical tradition of generations of Italian Americans whose forefathers arrived to Ellis island and began their struggle to fit into American society. They are part of a specific gastronomic tradition, the tradition of Italian migrants to the States, who in many cases, since the beginning of the twentieth century but also in more recent years, have 'exported' and recreated the Italian food tradition on American ground. Because of the different climate, the different ground, and above all, the fact of being considered — especially at the beginning — an ethnic food, Italian Americans adapted their culinary tradition and created one of their own. We could say that the Italian food tradition is one of the elements that makes them still feel the connection with the motherland, but in many cases it is a re-elaboration of Italian tradition born within the wider multicultural and multiethnic gastronomic tradition of the USA.

The major point nowadays is the economic and political diatribe going on in the press and in EU documents against these products because they are deceptive in their presentation to the consumer, that is to say, the commercial strategies used to present these products as Italian or Italian made, while they are not, they are totally produced in the USA. However, beyond the deceiving attitude of certain ads (not only in North America but in many countries), in many cases the products are presented as made in the Italian way but produced in the USA and stand as examples of Italian-American food. More than in the producer's attitude the problem arises with the consumer's non-awareness and incompetence, that is to say, the common American consumer probably does not know the difference between Italian made products and Italian-American ones. In many cases a sounding like name of the product such as, for example, Fontinella or Cambozola (referring to fontina and gorgonzola cheeses, respectively) deceive the American consumer who does not know the difference between the authentic product and this one. In marketing it is a strategy defined as 'foreign branding' where the term describes the advantage obtained through the use of foreign or foreign sounding names for products. Clearly, this can be used by both an Italian producer selling abroad and an American one selling in the USA. A very clear example is *Parmesan* sold all over the world as Parmigiano Reggiano, but in many cases very distant from it in substance, flavor and nutritional characteristics. In these cases the consumer is deceived because the product is presented as authentic, that is to say produced in a very different territory and by different processes. As

we said above, the territory where products are produced clearly define the characteristics of the products. Therefore, even when the producers clearly state that the food is produced in the USA, the consumer does not grasp the difference between the authenticity of a product and its quality. As we will see in our examples, the Wisconsin milk used for cheese production is of a very high quality, nonetheless the products, for example the parmesan cheese, even if produced following the same procedures as in Parma (Italy), cannot be the same parmesan. This is the point where the struggle for DOP products begin.

From a cultural perspective the sense of 'place' also has another meaning. We are used to what we know, we eat what we are used to eating. Italian food in the USA has changed and adapted since the 18th century through migration and the creation of Italian communities in North America. In many cases the products advertised as Italian food are produced by generations of Italian migrants who, on the one hand, created family brands, on the other adapted themselves to the primary sources and re-elaborated the processes of production they learned in Italy. Through time, Italian food in America has become Italian-American food, with examples of recipes that are non-existent in Italy, like spaghetti with meatballs or the famous fettuccine Alfredo, which can be found in any Italian restaurant in the USA. This is due partly to the necessary adaptation to different ingredients, the original ones not always be found locally and to the changing attitudes in gastronomy in migrant communities. This is the Italian food Italian-American consumers probably like more than the authentic Italian. As Fabio Parasecoli says, the Italian-American culinary heritage was invented in the USA, notwithstanding, this eno-gastronomic tradition is charged with emotional and symbolic connotations that create a sense of nostalgia (Parasecoli 2014).

We have to remember that a major part of a culture is made by its food, especially for the Italian one that possesses a rich gastronomic tradition. Food is always part of the assimilation project for migrants. The perception of Italian food in the USA has completely changed since the last century when it was linked to migrants 'fresh off the boat' and considered lower class and poor. The negative stereotypes attached to Italian food have developed through the years into a positive perception not only in the American context but all over the world, acquiring a different status, connected to higher classes, good lifestyle and elegance. Italian chefs are in demand in important restaurants all over the world and Italian recipes are becoming better and better known (also thanks to TV programmes). Spaghetti with meatballs have been replaced by a wider knowledge of Italian food tradition, and food has been associated with Italian taste and elegance. The Italian gastronomic tradition, born in the rural communities, has acquired the same elegant and refined status of the French one, born in the Parisian Court.

Our essay will first consider the advertising strategies used in the USA through cultural representations and the utilization of stereotypes connected to Italian culture. Secondly, we will analyse the advertising strategies of Italian food products in the USA, specifically the brands Barilla and Galbani. Moreover, we will take into account the recent example of the commercial produced by the Italian Ministry for Economical development aimed at promoting the authenticity of Italian DOP products. The Italian Ministry for Economic Development has created a website (www.italianmade.com), as well as a TV commercial and launched a print campaign to defend Italian products abroad from the spreading of Italian sounding goods. The TV commercial entitled "The Extraordinary Italian Taste" (echoing the title of the entire campaign) has been directed by Silvio Muccino, an Italian actor, screenwriter, and director, brother of the more famous director Gabriele. It was officially presented at the 2015 Milan Expo Exhibition. The commercial focuses on authenticity and the importance of the Italian origin of foods. Clearly this is a political commercial that wants to defend Italian products, or at least, make the consumer aware of the differences from Italian sounding products. The commercial clearly aims at high-brow consumers looking for authentic Italian food, probably more expensive but extremely accurate and handcrafted. Thirdly, we will analyse the way in which Italian-American cheese producers present their products on their websites. What we want to show here, is how visual and verbal discourses play a central role in the formation and recreation of Italian cultural representations to a North American audience.

## 2. Cultural representations and stereotypes in food advertising

"Promise, large promise, is the soul of an advertisement," as the father of the English Dictionary Samuel Johnson (1709–84) wrote in the well-known eighteenth-century journal *The Idler* (no. 40, 20 January 1759). Dr. Johnson's words are still valid nowadays: promises are at the core of advertising campaigns. Advertising is a form of communication that must be effective and deliver a persuasive message to its target audience. Its principal aims are to catch the viewer's attention, describe the advertised product and render it memorable for the buyer. Moreover, advertising tells us about social changes; its language reflects the ideologies standing behind them. It can be considered a social repertoire of changing values. The semiotician Jean Marie Floch affirmed that advertisements develop around a theme made of narrative elements, characters and figures, contexts and sets, actions that are repeated through time with different sequences. It is a complex plot of "thymic evaluations" and "valorizations," terms Floch borrows from Greimas's theories (Floch 2001). It is important to underline that the valorization applied to the product is something that can be ascribed to it but it is not always a real quality. The addresser chooses to communicate values through a message that is a narration of a "possible world" where these values are recognized and that the buyer assumes as his own. The addressee is asked to conform to these values; it is by buying the product that the consumer enters this artificial world. Ads are full of visual and verbal codes to be deciphered, signs that mirror social values according to the period when they are created. Time and setting are important elements if we examine advertising texts in a specific context because social practices and behaviours change through time and cultural images are reshaped as we move from one culture to another. The copy-writer refers to 'taste archetypes' and recreates them through a map of rhetorical strategies. In his analysis Eco (1964) distinguishes between three different levels of visual codification necessary to decode an ad: the iconic level (based on shapes, details, the whole image), the iconographic level (elements which have a precise connotation) and the tropological level (based on the use of rhetorical figures). Roland Barthes (1964) analysed an advertisement of Panzani, a brand of Italian food products produced in France, outlining the rhetorical figures and connotations recalling 'Italianness,' such as, for example the colours used (red, green and white, that is the Italian flag), the theme of genuineness, the theme of a slowpaced life-style. According to him all these visual rhetorical strategies are valorizations of the product, therefore the product is genuine, authentically Italian but incorporated into the French cuisine.

If Eco and Barthes highlighted the possibility of retracing a map of advertising visual and verbal rhetorical strategies, more recently, Guy Cook (1992) stated that advertising is a discourse strictly correlated to the context where it is produced, possessing specific forms according to its purposes and presenting characteristic lexical, syntactic and phonological aspects. Advertising is created in a complex interaction with other discourses and acts of communication. The adman creates a series of images for consumers that interpret the text from their own point of view and their own linguistic/cultural baggage. Therefore the choice of words and images is correlated to determined meanings and messages for a specifically located consumer. This is reflected in De Mooij's idea to "Think global, act local" (De Mooij 2004).

What we want to outline is how product images and representations are connected to specific cultural identities and work as cultural metaphors in specialised commercial texts like ads. If we look at discourse as an instrument of social construction of reality, the analysis of ads leads us to discover unwritten assumptions behind communication acts (Leeuwen 1993). As products of social interaction, ads unveil discourses connected with ethnicity, power, prejudice, sexism and ideology.

If we look at ads, commercials and websites of Italian products abroad we can see that they reiterate very specific and connotated images of Italy and 'Italianness.' In our examples Italian culture is 'translated' into visual and verbal discourses that an American audience can immediately recognize and be fascinated by. These commercials are created for target consumers who possess their mental representations, attitudes and values.

Stuart Hall's notion of "translatability" (Hall 1997) of culture in terms of shared conceptual maps and codes which govern the translation among concepts and signs can be useful in order to analyse these marketing strategies. According to the scholar this is the result of a set of social conventions through which individuals learn and become culturally competent subjects. If on the one hand, advertising strategies are dictated by economical choices, on the other hand, they are the result of social practices strictly linked to an ideological collective imaginary (Federici 2010a and 2010b). Moreover, as Critical Discourse Analysis and Discourse Studies taught us, a text is meaningful and coherent if it refers to a mental model, discourses are produced and interpreted in terms of mental representations which refer to specific events and are socially shared as social representations (Goddard 1998; Goldman 1992; Hermeren 1999; Kress and Leeuwen 1996; Myers 1994; Pennarola 2004). In socio-cognitive approaches the notion of knowledge is thus connected to socio-cultural commonsense. (Kövecses 2005). Culture, in fact, plays an important role in the construction of the self and the perception of ideal images offered in ads. Discussing the positive associations with brands Marieke De Mooji talks about an association network made of recognizable objects which reflect people's values and feelings (De Mooji 2010). For De Mooij individuals are products of their culture, share beliefs, norms and values and can recognize clearly the "cultural patterns" in any text. Moreover, images are correlated to 'emotional connections' which also include stereotypes. Nonetheless stereotypes result in not only negative repetitions of prejudices but also functional elements, because when effective, there is instant recognition by the consumer, a recognition that works for the selling of the product.

Thinking about stereotypes about Italian culture we can take as example the ironic mapping of the Bulgar artist Yanko Tsvetkov (2015) who lives in cosmopolitan London. In his mapping Italy is the land of "Godfathers" for Americans, the land of "Noisy, Friendly People" for the French, the home of "Pizza and Museums" for Germans, and part of the "Evil Federated Empire of Europe" for the British (and this before Brexit).

Playing on stereotypes works very well in advertising where they are skilfully recreated through verbal and visual elements and the web of connotations that is created among them. This because, in a way, stereotypes in a sense are adaptations of expectations constructed through metaphors. In his well-known volume, *Metaphor in Culture*, Zoltan Kövecses affirms that "part of the selling power of an advertisement depends on how well chosen the conceptual metaphor that the picture and/or the words used in the advertisement attempt to evoke in people is. An appropriately selected metaphor may work wonders in promoting the sale of an item" (Kövecses 2005: 171). Advertising exploits linguistic and pictorial metaphors as many scholars such as Charles Forceville (1996), Jacques Durand (1987) and Keiko Tanaka (1994) have demonstrated.

There is a long history of associations between foods, places and people and the use of foods as emblems and markers of national identities. Foods "do not simply come from places [...] but also make places as symbolic constructs, being deployed in the discursive construction of various imaginative geographies" (Cook and Crang 2003: 115). Food as a locus of memory has been studied by different scholars (Holtzman 2006; Gabbacia 1998) who have outlined how food is an important element in order to recreate a collective memory and identity among immigrants in the USA. Food choices among immigrants are the key to understanding social relationships and become tokens of identity (Rodriguez 2014; Cinotto 2014; Parasecoli 2014). Food is both a metaphor for national identity and a way to be included in American society (Poe 2001). For Italian Americans Italian food was the instrument for their affiliation in the new world, while at the same time, it became a tool for self-representation. Italian-American food differed from the idea of an industrial food production (epitomized by fast food) typical of the American middle class. It also became a sector where Italian Americans found their way for acquiring a social status (Diner 2001; Cinotto 2004; Oyangen 2009). The path from the idea of a lower class food to a refined and elaborate culinary tradition was long but has been achieved. As Fred Gardaphé and Weying Xu outline discussing the representation of ethnic food in American literature, "the restoration of ethnic dignity and pride operate through culinary enjoyment" (2007: 6).

## 3. Eating Italian in the USA

Many Italian food producers export their products to the USA. Brands like Barilla, Bertolli, Giovanni Rana, Galbani and many others are well known by American consumers. Their advertising strategies are designed for American consumers and have created a growing and copious market in the American context for Italian food brands. Advertising their products these brands utilise specific cultural representations and often stereotypes about Italians and Italian culture. Italian food is represented to American consumers taking into account their point of view on Italian culture and identity. Generally speaking, if we look at advertisements of Italian food and beverages in the USA we can see that there are various 'themes' around which the advertiser constructs the text. These themes are strictly related to metaphors connected to the Italian-American identity, and are the symbols through which Italian culture and 'Italianness' are recognized in the USA. The principal themes are:

- 1) The Italian family: usually represented with a group of people happy to be together, comprising several generations, laughing, talking, kissing and expressing emotions.
- 2) Love and passion: obtained through the representation of happy couples and an idea of romantic and passionate love.

- 3) A stereotyped vision of gender roles: often symbolized by figures like the 'macho,' the 'angel of the house' and the 'fallen woman.'
- 4) Authenticity: the representation of what is 'really truly Italian' is achieved through different strategies where the notion of tradition is central. For example, the use of the old world theme in a cinematic nostalgic Italy of the 50s recalling the famous movie *Roman Holiday* (1953); or the notion of tradition connected to a detailed reconstruction of the 'history of the brand' commonly represented as a small family firm (even when this is not the case because they are well-known and established industries).
- 5) The myth of a rural pre-industrial past: frequently represented with outdoor locations, such as gardens, the Italian countryside, small villages, Medieval streets and Renaissance squares; and possibly places or monuments that viewers can recognize.
- 6) Sunny weather and holidays: the representation of an always sunny place which perpetuates a persistent idea of serenity, relaxation and out of the ordinary experience.
- 7) Italian life-style: a theme which builds up on the notion of an Italian 'good life,' a slow-paced life-style, very different from the American one.
- 8) Genuineness and unadulterated food: the representation of healthy food and healthy diet symbolised by visual images which show the naturalness of the ingredients with references to the Italian warm and sunny climate and the green landscape; or images of kitchen tables strewn with garlic cloves, basil and tomatoes.
- 9) Aesthetic values: the representation of Italian arts and architecture united to the notion of beauty. Not only is Italy a wonderful place from an artistic point of view but it is the land of elegance where people are all stylish and trendy.

All these themes, not only number 5, utilise recognizable Italian symbols such as monuments, landscapes or colours (for example, the green, white and red of the Italian flag or the blue of the national sport teams) which act, following Dean Mac Cannell's definition, as "markers" for a specific cultural identity (1976: 110). Like a tourist, the consumer possesses a representation of a place that is the result of all the information gathered about it through reading or contact with cultural products. As MacCannell states, "monuments and places are deemed iconic and have important symbolic significance" (1976: 61), and are therefore useful in advertising.

A brand that clearly summarizes all the above mentioned themes in its commercials for the USA market is Barilla, the well-known Italian food producer, whose fame in the American context is mainly due to pasta and sauces. Clearly the amount of Barilla advertising for the USA market is large, but we will focus on two examples: a commercial known as "Sisters" produced in 2008 and a commercial entitled "The Perfect Night" presented in 2012. In

the first example the scene is rural, the location is probably Tuscany and the plot is based on a romantic story. All the elements of the clip, the choice of the characters involved, the location, the music, create a romantic mood. The story develops around a family and a possible love story: a young American girl visits her sister's family in Italy where she is introduced to a young Italian neighbour. In the second sequence the two sisters cook together in a very traditional country house Italian kitchen where the focus of attention for the viewer, that is to say, the object is multigrain *Barilla* pasta. This object offers a link to various themes: well being and healthy diet, family and love, and lifestyle. Everything refers to the Italian style of life and prepares for the love story. This is clear at the end of the commercial when the family is eating pasta and the charming young neighbour pronounces his only word in the entire commercial, "perfetto" (perfect), while he is admiringly looking at the young sister. Through this visual and verbal strategy, pasta is related to passion through the ambiguity of the reference: is he referring to the girl or to the pasta? This is an example of a stereotyped version of Italy that utilizes some of the above mentioned themes. The chosen music — Bocelli's song, Mille lune, mille onde — highlights the cultural reference to Italianness, love, passion and melodrama.

A few years later, in 2012, *Barilla* presented to the American market the commercial "The perfect night," our second example. There are two main differences from the previous commercial: 1) here the family is not at the centre of the plot but a young Italian couple; 2) Americans are not present in the story, on the contrary, what is represented here is the Italian couple and their lifestyle from an American point of view. The opening scene is set in an Italian villa terrace which recalls the Como Lake district where an elegant party is going on. The couple reaches the buffet where there is only one dish of spaghetti left. Looking at each other in a conspiratorial way, they finally decide to share it. While eating they come very close to each other because they end up chewing opposite ends of the same noodle and accidentally nibble their way into a kiss. The 'spaghetti kiss' is a romantic trope known since the Disney movie The Lady and the Tramp because it is frequently repeated in many romantic representations. However, in this case the two do not kiss because the strand of noodle breaks (obviously it is not Barilla pasta). This idea is made explicit by the voiceover saying "don't ruin the moment." The scene changes and we see the couple at home cooking Barilla spaghetti. This time the noodle doesn't break allowing the couple to kiss and have the "perfect night": the spaghetti kiss scene is accomplished. Also in this case the music, an acoustic guitar version of the famous Italian song *Volare*, is important. The theme of genuineness and freshness is utilised at the end of the commercial through the display of the Barilla sauce and spaghetti in their packaging together with their natural ingredients (tomatoes, olive oil and basil), similarly to the old *Panzani*'s

ad analyzed by Barthes. The themes here evoked are again passion and romantic love, aesthetic values presented by both places and people, and the Italian lifestyle.

A very good example that summarises all of these themes is the recent commercial "The Extraordinary Italian Taste" produced by the Italian Ministry for Economic development (2015), already mentioned above. It is composed of four different scenes presenting four stories focused on a specific Italian product: oil, cheese, pasta and cold cuts. All products are shown in a final scene accompanied by the claim "we turn the best ingredients into extraordinary products." Moreover, the commercial closes with the words "buy authentic Italian, get more" and with the logo that has been specifically created for this campaign. The verbal and the visual elements are united to certify the origin of the products (their authenticity) and act as a 'signature' authenticating what has just been said. Each scene contains a magical element — the product — that transports the protagonist into another time and space. The first scene opens with an establishing shot of the exterior of a typical American high-brow house followed by the presentation of the interior of the house, specifically the kitchen, where a woman is dressing a salad with Italian olive oil. While she is doing it a drop falls on the floor which is immediately transformed into grass. Through the magic object — olive oil — the woman is transported into an Italian 'oliveto' (olive grove) where a middle-aged man is selecting olives. They smile at each other and seem happy because they are enjoying the natural world. The Italian product is immediately linked to nature, genuineness and a slow-paced lifestyle. In the second scene a young man is preparing a dish with different cheeses when the wind comes in making the window curtains flap. Also in this case he is magically transported into an Italian dairy house where a beautiful young woman is making cheese. They look intensely at each other while holding the curtain (white as milk) in their hands. In the third scene an American woman is cooking pasta and the steamy air magically transports her into a fresh pasta shop where a pasta maker is kneading the dough. He playfully touches her nose with flour and she smiles childishly at the gesture. In the fourth scene a young man is preparing a platter of cold cuts and when he switches on the cooker once again he is magically transposed into an Italian laboratory of 'salumi,' cold meats, where he meets a man branding a ham. The four scenes refer to the four elements: earth, air, water and fire. Earth is recalled in the first scene through the olive oil drop which makes the floor turn into life giving earth; air comes in with the wind in the second scene; water is evoked by the steam in the third scene and fire by the flame in the fourth scene. These four elements act as the magical link between each product and its origin. Another interesting element is the presence in three scenes out of four — of an older man who represents experience and, metaphorically, tradition, linked to the product and its process of production. On the contrary, in the second scene the themes of romanticism

and love are presented through the young man's and woman's passionate gaze. All the scenes have at the centre the theme of authenticity through a depiction of products and their genuineness. Moreover, the theme of Italian beauty and style is represented through various mechanisms: the visual presentation of products and the elegance of the video in itself.

In addition to Italian producers who advertise their products on the American market (the same products sold in Italy), there are also examples of Italian food producers who create specific food products for North America. A good example is the well known brand, Galbani, which produces mozzarella cheese, cheese strings and ricotta for the USA. The most recent commercial (2016) well exemplifies a typical Italian product advertised in the USA comparing the two cultures. The first shot of the commercial shows an Italian woman grating mozzarella cheese over a dish. This scene is presented with a split screen where the viewer sees both the Italian woman and an American one doing the same thing. The following shot presents the variety of food and the way it can be utilised in different dishes and recipes. The versatility of the product — which can be used in many dishes — ends with a symbol of Italian food, pizza, which not by chance is eaten at home around a table like in an Italian family. Eating Galbani you live and eat like an Italian. The commercial closes with a very stereotypical Italian gesture of the woman emphatically kissing her fingers, indicating the exquisite quality of food. While the commercial emphasises both in the visual and the verbal elements the 'Italianness' and therefore the authenticity (not only of the products but also of an Italian way of cooking, eating and living), the product is not produced in Italy nor it is similar to the mozzarella used in Italy (mozzarella is not a product you can grate over dishes, it's a moist, springy cheese you slice or chop). It is thus an Italian flavoured product for American consumers and sold through images that are familiar for them and that they can recognize: one example, the mandolin music that accompanies the commercial. Paradoxically it is an Italian factory selling what is called an Italian sounding product while outlining its Italian authenticity. This is very clear also on *Galbani's* American website (www.galbanicheese.com), where in the section "our story" the viewer finds a section on the Italian tradition of making cheese where the themes of authenticity, love and passion for cheese and genuineness of the product are retraceable through various keywords such as "trust," "quality," "raw ingredients," "freshness," and "tradition." The section mirrors what we find in all Italian-American cheese producers' websites, that is the history of the producer and a sort of family tradition in making cheese.

## 4. Selling Italian Cheese in the USA through Websites

If *Galbani* is an Italian brand advertising Italian food but in 'an American way,' there are many examples of Italian-American brands selling their products as Italian. Our examples are taken from the cheese market, which,

since the beginning of the XX century, has been a sector dominated by Italian migrants and generations of Italian Americans (Durand 1948). As a matter of fact, Italian migrants were specialized in cheese production and this allowed them to produce an Italian-like product while creating their own factories and thus achieving higher social status. In time this production created an American market for itself, previously limited to Americans of Italian descent. Nowadays Italian food is eaten all over the USA and Italian-American restaurant chains, like *Fazolis* or *Olive Garden*, can be found everywhere and are patronised by Americans of every heritage.

Our analysis is focused on specialized websites of cheese producers because this textual typology (hypertextual and multimodal) permits longer texts and more images relative to the product and the producer and enable us to see how Italian identity is represented. This textual typology allows the reader to better understand both the story of the brand and of the products (that is to say the brand identity) while unveiling a clear cultural, and stereotypical, representation. Taking into consideration four different websites, www.sartoricheese.com; www.belgioso.com; www.distefanocheese.com; and www.rumianocheese.com we will analyse specific themes such as: 1) emigration; 2) family history; 3) the creation of a tradition and 4) integration into the American social texture.

Usually the so-called Italian sounding products are sold in the American market through packaging and naming strategies that simply imply an Italian origin. In so doing they aim at recalling an Italian origin of the product utilizing an Italian surname like, for example, *Saputo*, *Tolibia*, *Rumiano*, *Ambrosi*, and many others, or using a term identifying a typical Italian cheese but creating a neologism, like for example, *Cambozola* (for gorgonzola), *Fontinella* (for fontina), *American grana* (for grana padano), *Sarvecchio Parmesan* (for 'stravecchio' parmesan), ricotta parmesan (an unusual mix of Italian ricotta and parmesan) and so on. The packaging always presents Italian symbols such as the national flag and its three colours (red, white and green), well-known monuments (the Pisa tower or a Venetian bridge), the image of people with traditional Italian costumes, or images of the Italian countryside.

Producers (and advertisers) utilize more subtle and complex strategies for the products' presentation on the website. The website's target user is different from an ordinary consumer, therefore different strategies are employed in order to present the Italianness of the product and make it believable and authentic. The starting point of our analysis is to see how the themes always associated with the above mentioned Italian products are narrated and explained on specialized websites. The analysis of a website also considers the evaluation of the viewer's competence, a sort of 'implied user' concept following Umberto Eco's narratological "implied reader" notion (Eco 1979). That is to say, we must have in mind that any viewer possesses his own semiotic "encyclopaedia" (Eco 1979), and therefore just

by looking at websites we can immediately understand which competencies are taken for granted and presupposed and which ones are given in a more or less didactic way. The first question certainly is what information is given on the website about the product and the produce and how it is given. It is immediately clear that in the representation of food products related to Italy (but actually this could be true for any ethnic group) stereotypes are massively utilized. This is primarily done in order to create an easy way to read the website; secondly, products are connected to a specific idea of Italy and Italian culture possessed by American consumers (and websurfers). These viewers must find what they are looking for and can recognize as Italian. We cannot forget that websites are also commercial vehicles and practical spaces where producers sell their products, therefore practical information about prices, selling points or online buying must be clear and immediately traceable. Thus the website is both a site for information and for sales, and these two functions are united through a narration of the goods. Products are connected to various elements: Italy, or their Italian origin, the history of Italians in America, the geography of Italy and the USA, and the specificity of the product. In all the examples chosen the strategy is to narrate the producer's history (usually a family history) in order to positively denote the product. The idea is both to create a tradition for the producer and at the same time to present a story for the product. In this way tradition is transformed into a quality of the product itself. While surfing the website the viewer is asked to recognize these elements and to understand how they are related to the advertised product. At this point it is clear that the choice of images and written text in a website is not a neutral act but a strategic one, and it is also clear that according to the viewers' competences the fruition of the website changes.

A very good example of a family narrative that creates a specific image of the advertised product is *Sartori*'s website (www.sartoricheese.com). Sartori is one of the major cheese producers in the USA, located in Plymouth, Wisconsin, one of the USA's major areas for cheese production. Sarto*ri*'s homepage clearly highlights three possible actions that the viewer can take: 1) a link to information about cheese pairings (an American consumer will know less about the possible pairings and recipes with Italian cheeses); a link to an informative section about Sartori's awards and prizes (in order to outline the quality of the products); and 3) a link to the shop online section defined as cheese shop as if it was a real shop, an important element in selling Italian food in the Usa (Raspa 1991). Generally speaking, it is immediately evident that the choice of images and design of the homepage is well-thought in order to give an idea of elegance and refinement to the product, clearly recalling the above mentioned aesthetic value theme, related to a refined representation of Italian identity. What the viewer immediately glimpses is the presence of a peculiar logo on the upper left-corner of the page which looks like a noble family crest. The explanation of this

curious emblem can be found in the section called "About us." The crest is accompanied by a detailed explanation of each visual element: the crest is composed by a shield, overtopped by a crown and surrounded by a laurel wreath with a date on the bottom. The crest resumes the Sartori's family history: the shield is divided into three sections, on the top there is a ship alluding to the Finlandia, the steamer that brought the founder Paolo Sartori to America, on the bottom left an image of Wisconsin, where he went to live and work, and on the bottom right the image of two cows, an acknowledgement of the link with local farmers and milk producers. The crest is made of symbols that exemplify the history of the Sartori family as part of the American Dream. This is also stated in the written text of the section where the story of the founder is an example of a positive American story of success and enterprise. Just looking at this website we understand that after years of negative connotations about Italian Americans and their immigration history, here immigration is depicted as a positive value. Sartori presents a positive Italian-American history of immigration, an account of hard working people and their full integration into the American territory. It is a history of four generations of Italian Americans who have become part of the "great American tradition" and are proud of it. This is identified in the logo by four stars over the crown which stand for the generations who have joined the business. The theme of the family is also marked by the title of the central section of the webpage: "Really, this page should be called 'family." The written text includes everyone taking part in the production of Sartori cheeses, from farmers, to cheese makers, (even the cows are alluded to) within the family history. The viewer is also directly addressed and thus involved in this history. The webpage includes a video and a chronology of the family's history. The video, partly in black and white and full of archive footage about Italian immigration to the USA, focuses both on the history of the factory and of the family, clearly intertwined. The video is more a presentation of people than of products, so that the life-stories go hand by hand with the growth of the brand. This focus on people can be found in all the sections of the webpage with links to people working in and for *Sartori* creating the image of the factory as a 'big family.' The reference to people working for Sartori also reiterate the notion of a hand-crafted, artisanal product. Artisan cheeses like Sartori's allude to two themes relative to the above mentioned Italian products: 1) genuineness and unadulterated food and 2) the Italian life-style (slow-food culture). The whole message is connected to the central theme of authenticity, because the explanation about the product's manufacture is related to the Italian tradition of making cheese.

A second example is the website of *BelGioioso*, another brand of Italian cheese in the USA, whose founder, Errico Auricchio, emigrated to the States in 1979 (www.belgioso.com) and settled in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The homepage of the website presents similar sections to the previous

example, that is to say, links to products, recipes, awards, a section on how to handle the cheese but apparently not a direct link to buying the products. The website appears as less accurate and with less attention to design. However, the logo is very interesting, representing the American and the Italian flags intertwined at the centre in order to highlight the Italian-American background of the family. Near the image of the flags viewers can read a sentence, which is, on one side, in American English and on the other in Italian: "classic Italian cheeses made in America." The use of the two languages makes the link to an Italian tradition grown on the American ground visible. On the bottom of the circle the viewer is instructed on how to pronounce the brand name BelGioso ("say bel-joyoso"). The claim remarks the importance of tradition and continuity with its Italian origins ("Quality never stops"). Well visible at the centre of the webpage, we find a link to the products' qualities through the idea of "the 9 secrets of BelGioioso" which also refer to Italian tradition and authenticity. The titles given to the secrets are made of keywords which enclose the qualities of the products linked to the themes usually utilised for Italian products. The first secret is "History, tradition, passion, family"; the images included in "secret #1" aim to present a long history of the brand (even if it was founded in the 1980s) through images of cheese production from one hundred years ago, pictures of artisan cheese makers of the past, a photograph of the founder showing his award winning provolone. All these images are in black and white and create an idea of past times, producing both a feeling of nostalgia (for the lost country) and of never lost tradition. The written text which accompanies secret number one presents the story of the founder, clearly connected to a family of Italian cheese producers, the Auricchios, whose products are still sold in Italy, and who are especially known for their 'provolone.' It is again a history of immigration, different from the one mentioned above, but still connected to the arrival of the family founder to the USA. This is reiterated with the sentence: "In 1979, Errico moved his family from Italy to America with the goal of continuing his great-grandfather's legacy." It is again a history of a family able to integrate into the American 'dairyland.' The website presents, on the one hand, the pride of being successful Italian Americans, and on the other, the strict connection with local farmers which is clearly perceived in a positive way by American viewers. The keywords "tradition" and "quality" are repeated all through the text, and emphasised by the inclusion of a written and visual reference to Italian cheese makers arriving in the USA with the founder which emphasises once again the notions of authenticity, tradition and quality ascribed to the products.

Another example of an even younger brand is *Di Stefano* cheese (www. distefanocheese.com), born in the 1990s and located in another important area of cheese production, California, and specifically in Pomona. The website is essential and easy to use, and once again, we find the strong link

with both the American territory and the family's history. The logo is in red, white and green (the Italian flag) and the claim is "Premium Italian Cheese." The most interesting section is entitled "Heritage meets Tradition" where the viewer finds the recurrent keywords: family tradition, passion, lifetime experience. The owner and founder, Mimmo Bruno, introduced the 'burrata' (a kind of mozzarella) into the American market quite recently; it is a small company that focuses on its artisanal character. Also in this case the founder's history is more relevant than the company's story itself, and viewers can read his account on his emigration to the USA in the mid-80s. Not by chance the name of the company — *Distefano* — is not the producer's surname but the first name of both the founder's father and his first son. Here the history of early twentieth century Italian immigration is not visible. If in the Sartori website any Italian American can remember the story of their family and the journey from Italy to the USA through Ellis Island, in the last two examples we have a more 'American' story, the self-made man description and how the new generations are proud of their Italian origins while being part of the American community. Also here the history of the family is strictly correlated to the history of the product, in this case the 'burrata.' The theme of authenticity is central; authenticity is introduced by the information on the process of cheese production that is exactly the same one utilised in Italy. Therefore, their products are not similar to, but exactly the same as the ones made in Italy; they are not adapted to the American taste, they are Italian without compromise. However, since they are produced in California they cannot be the same products produced in Apulia, the region of Southern Italy where burrata comes from.

However, *DiStefano* is different from American cheese producers with Italian names that propose Italian products that are not such, for example, *Rumiano* (www.rumianocheese.com) founded in 1921 and located in Willows, California. *Rumiano* presents the same schema of an Italian cheese making tradition, showing old photographs and texts about the family's immigration to the USA, introducing the products through many references to Italy and Italian culture but the company produces cheeses such as cheddar, jack, Swiss cheese. The strategy utilised in order to present the products' authenticity is the same but it is used also for non Italian cheeses. Therefore, the idea of Italianness is given to add higher quality to any product.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the four websites of Italian-American cheese producers have demonstrated that in order to sell Italian or Italian sounding products in the USA, the keywords utilised in written texts and the images connected to them, are: 1) the pride of being Italian (or of Italian descent), 2) a family history always connected with the history of Italian emigration to the States, and 3) Italian eno-gastronomic tradition. The idea of an Italian authenticity is related to an Italian-American food tradition

which has arisen through the years, by contact with American culture. We can say it is a 'recreated' authenticity, but nonetheless a real one because, for the Italian-American community, this is Italian food. From this point of view we can make a distinction between the marketing strategy of the Italian sounding product advertised all over the world — which advertises a fake Italian food product —, and the representation in advertising forms of Italian food products born in the USA and made by generations of Italian Americans. Italian Americans are what they eat: their cheeses are local American products, produced according to their Italian origins but re-elaborated within the Italian-American cultural culinary tradition.

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