

Constructing Italian Cuisine: Between Myth and Reality

Book of Abstracts

Date: Thursday, 7 May 2026

Venue: Aula Magna, Palazzo San Leonardo - Riviera Garibaldi, 13, Treviso

Languages: English and Italian

Organizers: Linda Rossato and Giuseppe De Bonis, Ca' Foscari University, Venice

Attendance: In person and remote access via ZOOM Platform

Symposium Abstract

This symposium explores the discursive and semiotic construction of Italian gastronomic culture, tracing its evolution from mid-20th-century promotional materials to 21st-century digital landscapes. Through an examination of various media, text types, and contexts — including historical ENIT archives, tourist menus, contemporary cookbooks and television cookery shows, tourism websites, and social media influencers — the research will investigate how 'Italian-ness' is negotiated between authentic practices and myth-making.

Central to this discussion are the roles of language, intercultural communication and adaptation, as well as translation, in the international marketing of Italian food practices. This symposium will highlight how adapting culinary narratives across linguistic borders involves a complex semiotic process where Denomination of Protected Origin (DPO) labels serve as legal safeguards and as symbols of prestige. Furthermore, the symposium will identify the use of humour and storytelling as rhetorical tools employed by bloggers, influencers, and content creators to bridge the gap between regional tradition and global consumption. By connecting historical institutional branding with modern digital promotion, the symposium argues that the 'myth' of Italian cuisine is a dynamic construct that is continuously reshaped through deliberate cultural mediation and the strategic translation of social rituals into a universal lifestyle brand.

Contenuti della Giornata di Studio

La giornata di Studio esplora la dimensione discorsiva e quella semiotica della cultura gastronomica italiana, tracciandone l'evoluzione a partire da materiali promozionali della prima metà del Novecento ai contenuti digitali contemporanei. Attraverso l'analisi di vari media, e tipologie testuali, tra cui brochure e riviste turistiche degli archivi storici dell'ENIT (Ente Nazionale delle Industrie Turistiche), menù turistici, libri di cucina e programmi televisivi contemporanei, siti web turistici e presenza di influencer sui social media - la ricerca indagherà come l'“italianità” venga negoziata tra pratiche autentiche e creazione di miti.

Al centro della discussione vi sono il ruolo della lingua, della comunicazione interculturale, dell'adattamento e della traduzione nella promozione internazionale delle pratiche enogastronomiche italiane. Questo workshop metterà in evidenza come l'adattamento delle narrazioni culinarie oltre i confini linguistici comporti un complesso processo semiotico in cui ad esempio le denominazioni di origine protetta (DOP) fungano da garanti di protocolli di produzione, ma anche come brand e potenti veicoli di marketing ma che poco abbiano a che fare con la tradizione. Inoltre, il simposio indagherà l'uso dell'umorismo e della narrazione come strumenti retorici impiegati da blogger, influencer e creatori di contenuti digitali per colmare il divario tra tradizione regionale e consumo globale. Mettendo a confronto il branding istituzionale con la moderna promozione digitale, il simposio intende argomentare che il “mito” della cucina italiana sia un costrutto dinamico che viene continuamente rimodellato attraverso la mediazione culturale e l'adattamento strategico di rituali sociali in un marchio di stile universale.

Book of Abstracts

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Gastronomic Tourism and the Construction of a Culinary National Identity. Insights from the DIETALY Project

Drawing on insights from the documents analysed by the DIETALY Project (Destination Italy in English Translation and Language over the Years), this study explores the emergence of gastronomic tourism in Italy and its role in constructing a culinary national identity. The present paper investigates how institutional discourse has contributed to the formation of the "myth" of an Italian food culture, as perceived by foreign observers. This investigation is facilitated by the analysis of multilingual brochures and magazines published by the Italian National Tourist Board (ENIT) between 1930 and 1959. The analysis focuses on a pivotal era spanning the Fascist regime, the interwar years, and the post-war reconstruction. During these decades, ENIT's promotional strategies were instrumental in the codification of regional traditions into a cohesive national narrative, positioning gastronomy as a central pillar of Italian hospitality. The research employs a diachronic perspective to analyse the evolution of narrative patterns across geopolitical phases. This analysis unveils the evolution of a deliberate construction of an external image, crafted to maximise national appeal. The paper demonstrates how these early institutional narratives

established the foundations for the contemporary global perception of Italian gastronomy, by negotiating the delicate balance between historical culinary reality and the strategic construction of a national myth.

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Translating the Semiosphere: Constructing Italian Cuisine for the Chinese Tourist Gaze

Italian cuisine has long been a semiosphere (Lotman & Clark, 2005): a dense, dynamic system of signs where ingredients, preparations, and rituals generate deep cultural meaning. Yet this semiotic system does not travel unchanged. From the simplicity of a *Neapolitan pizza* to the ritual of the *postprandial passeggiata*, this culinary language speaks of history, place, and identity. But what happens when this intricate semiotic system encounters a radically different cultural gaze? This paper investigates the construction of Italian cuisine for the rapidly growing demographic independent Chinese tourists, whose own rich culinary traditions and digital habits present a unique 'stress test' for established Italian food myths. Drawing on (gastronomic) discourse analysis and Urry's (2011) tourist gaze, this talk examines how Italian food is translated both semiotically and materially for a Chinese audience across both digital and physical spaces. Particular attention is given to Chinese social media platforms such as *Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book)* and *Douyin (TikTok)*, where new forms of 'pre-consumption guidance' shape expectations before travel takes place. This digital mediation extends far beyond menu translation; it creates a powerful feedback loop, prompting restaurants in high-tourism areas like the Veneto to adapt their offerings, service styles, and even their spatial design to accommodate this gaze. Local products such as *Prosecco* and *Tiramisu* become especially visible sites of semiotic negotiation, as they are re-coded within Chinese imaginaries of romance, luxury, and European distinction. The paper argues that this process reveals Italian cuisine not as a fixed heritage object, but as a living semiotic system continuously reshaped through translation, tourism, and platformed circulation. By tracing how the myth of Italian authenticity is re-packaged, negotiated, and sometimes reinforced for Chinese visitors, the study highlights translation as a central site where gastronomic identity is redefined between local tradition and global mobility.

References:

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The Intersection of Food Humor and Disgust

Whenever food and comedy intersect, disgust is rarely far behind. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Bakhtin's Carnival, in this talk I shall explore the affective, cognitive, and corporeal responses to food, highlighting the central role of humour both in the way we talk about food and in our perception of the body and disgust. Through a rich array of texts, from everyday language and literature to video, advertising, music, and above all, politics, I shall advance a comprehensive examination of the wider notion of taste.

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Cuochi in Galleria: Etiche ed etichette

Are we certain that the modern-day chef is a monolithic figure, endowed with the same prerogatives, the same qualities and abilities, skills and knowledge, and, above all, the same values? Can we rest on the idea that the chef, with its lights and shadows, legends and ridiculousness attached, follows the same ideal models everywhere, the same systems of meaning, similar procedures in the kitchen, endowing its celebrated dishes, if not the identical taste, with a constant air of family? Can we swear that the surprise effect so much sought after, and so much criticized, perhaps peppered with stereotypical value-screening (sustainability, care for the environment, fight against waste, km 0, respect for tradition, search for absolute flavor, vegetarianism...) is the only goal of the contemporary cook? or, more likely, are we faced with a conceptual nebula (aesthetic, ethical, political, social, economic, religious...) that should be somewhat articulated internally and redefined outwardly, i.e., thoroughly explained in order to be better understood? To try to answer such questions is the purpose of this paper.

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Food, Humour and Culinary Performance on Social Media.

Promoting the Italian culinary heritage

The international recognition of Italian food plays an enormous part in promoting the Italian cultural heritage. There is a highly performative aspect to this promotional strategy that caters to a centuries-old Italian diaspora in the US, Australia, Canada and elsewhere. As such, Italian food traditions, often playing on established cultural stereotypes, are instrumental in promoting cultural continuity and community-building in the diaspora, where food-storytelling engages tropes of nostalgia, material landscapes, and the authenticity of cooking ingredients and/or methods.

This performativity actualizes a trope of Italian culinary 'authenticity' that is both 'real' and humorously imagined, exaggerating the 'rules' of defining features of Italian cuisine. Although they

are primarily humorous, at a deeper level, these channels embody tropes of belonging, loss and 'cultural exile', of constructing and maintaining diasporic food communities through authentic food practices. The channels analysed in this talk (including Lionfeld, Pasta Queen, Mango Sushi, Growing up Italian, Hardcore Italian) adopt a small number of key visual and conceptual features that become recurrent iconic images represented as a brand and connected to a small selection of foods and utensils (pizza, pasta, the 'mocha' coffee maker), clothing (football T-shirts, pyjamas) or furniture ('retro' furniture and home decoration), background music, all promoting Italian 'authenticity'.

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The Bacaro Tour Experience: Representing Venice's Enogastronomic Traditions between Culinary and Pleasure Tourism

Venice's rich enogastronomic tradition, featuring locally rooted food and wines, is vital to its historical identity (Pes, 2007; Coco, 2011). Together with its monuments and artistic heritage, Venice's culinary tradition attracts over ten million annual visitors to the city and Lagoon Islands (Bettiol & Marini, 2025), proving that food is as essential as history to tourism (Calzolaio, 2017).

Beyond food and wine, Venice offers complex tasting experiences like cicchetti (appetizers, usually translated as 'Venetian tapas', cf. Cesiri, 2017). These are enjoyed with wine in traditional bacari (typical local taverns) as part of a time-honored social ritual (ibid.; Cesiri, Forthc.). Another tradition is the 'Bacaro Tour', a social ritual of hopping between bacari to sample snacks and wine (Bacaro Tour Venezia, 2026).

This study conducts a multimodal discourse analysis on the visual and verbal representations of Venice's enogastronomic traditions as a way of promoting the city's identity to international tourists by means of the 'Bacaro Tour' experience. To do so, the study examines specifically dedicated websites in English and argues that what they (re)present go beyond a mere tasting event; it reveals a more complex hedonistic pursuit that can be positioned between Culinary Tourism (i.e., food-motivated travel; de la Barre & Brouder, 2025) and Pleasure Tourism (or the psychological search for happiness and the structural freedom of the traveler; Bimonte, 2025).

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Alberto Grandi, Università di Parma – alberto.grandi@unipr.it

Nonne, eroi e nazioni: la cucina italiana come epica contemporanea

Se si volesse individuare oggi un dispositivo culturale capace di svolgere per l'identità italiana una funzione analoga a quella esercitata dall'epica omerica per il mondo greco, la risposta più plausibile non riguarderebbe né la letteratura né la storia nazionale né la politica, ma la cucina. Non nel senso riduttivo di repertorio gastronomico condiviso, bensì come sistema narrativo capace di produrre genealogie, appartenenze, continuità simboliche e memorie collettive.

L'analogia può apparire paradossale, ma sul piano storico-antropologico risulta sorprendentemente robusta. Le poleis greche nel loro periodo di massimo splendore, tra il VI e il V sec. a.C., non costituivano uno Stato unitario: erano comunità autonome, spesso in conflitto, caratterizzate da istituzioni differenti. Ciò che permetteva di riconoscere una comune appartenenza culturale non era l'organizzazione politica, bensì un insieme di riferimenti simbolici condivisi — lingua, culti, miti e, soprattutto, l'epica. Omero, vissuto tre secoli prima, forniva una memoria comune credibile, una genealogia eroica che consentiva comunità differenti di riconoscersi in una storia condivisa senza rinunciare alle proprie identità locali.

L'Italia contemporanea presenta una condizione strutturalmente analoga. È uno Stato politicamente unificato relativamente recente, caratterizzato da fortissime differenze regionali, linguistiche e culturali. La debolezza storica dell'identità nazionale italiana costituisce un tema classico della storiografia e della sociologia politica. In questo contesto, la cucina ha progressivamente assunto il ruolo di collante simbolico che altre istituzioni non sono riuscite a esercitare con la stessa efficacia.

Bionotes

Daniela Cesiri is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy). Her research interests include the history and varieties of English, ESP/EAP, and

studies in Corpus Linguistics, discourse analysis, Computer-Mediated Communication, food studies, tourism discourse, and pragmatics. Her book-length publications include the monographs *Nineteenth-Century Irish English: A Corpus-Based Linguistic and Discursive Analysis* (Mellen Press 2012), *The Discourse of Food Blogs: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Routledge 2020), *Communicating Food to Children: Linguistic and Socio-cultural Perspectives* (Routledge 2025), and the textbook *Variation in English Across Time, Space and Discourse* (Carocci 2015).

Delia Chiaro is Professor Emerita at the University of Bologna and a leading humour scholar. She has published numerous books, over 100 articles and chapters, and regularly speaks at global conferences. Recent works include *Playing with Food: Language, Humor and Disgust* (with Debra Aarons, Routledge, 2026) and *Comedy in Political Language: How Politicians Use Humour* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2026). Delia served as President of the International Society of Humor Studies (2016–17), sits on the editorial boards of *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, the *European Journal of Humour Research*, and *RISU: Rivista Italiana di Studi sull'Umore*, and is affiliated with Brunel University's Centre for Comedy Studies Research. She is currently actively involved in setting up *GRISU Gruppo di Ricerca Italiano di Studi sull'Umore*.

Alberto Grandi is Associate Professor of Economic History at the University of Parma. He holds a PhD in Economic and Social History from Bocconi University and has taught at the University of Parma since the late 1990s. His research interests include urban history, the history of professional groups in the pre-industrial period, local development, and the history of food and food systems, with a particular focus on the relationship between tradition, innovation, markets, and consumption. He is the author of several books, including *Denominazione di Origine Inventata* (2018), *Storia delle nostre paure alimentari* (2023), *La cucina italiana non esiste* (with Daniele Soffiati, 2024), *In vino felicitas* (with Andrea Casadio, 2025), and *L'invenzione del cuoco* (2025), and has published extensively on economic history and food studies.

Gianfranco Marrone is Full Professor of Semiotics in the Department of Cultures and Society at the University of Palermo. He is Director of the PhD programme in “Semiotics: Studies on Text, Discourse, Media, Cultures” at the same university. He has taught at several institutions, including the University of Pollenzo and IULM University in Milan, and has lectured widely in Italy and internationally. He is also Director of the Centro internazionale di scienze semiotiche and the Circolo semiologico siciliano. His research interests include semiotics, mass media, aesthetics, and literary theory, with a particular focus on socio-semiotics and semio-aesthetics. His work has explored the relationship between signification and perception and has made significant contributions to the study of food, branding, urban spaces, journalism, politics, advertising, fashion, and television from a semiotic perspective. He has published extensively in both English and Italian and has also edited and translated into Italian works by Roland Barthes and Algirdas J. Greimas.

Linda Rossato is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at Ca' Foscari University, Venice in the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, where she co-ordinates the BA in Linguistic and Cultural Mediation. Her research interests span intercultural communication and translation, the language of food; tourism communication, audiovisual translation (AVT), non-professional translation, and child language brokering. She is currently a researcher within the nationally funded DIETALY project, which investigates the promotion of Italy as a tourist destination. Her editorial work includes a co-edited special issue of the international

journal *The Translator* titled “Food and Culture in Translation” (2015). She is the author of the monograph *Food Television Discourse: A Cross-Cultural Diachronic Approach* (2022), and she has recently co-edited a special issue of *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* (2025) on the diachronic development of audiovisual translation.

Mette Rudvin completed her studies in Norway and the UK, and holds a PhD in Translation Studies; she also holds an MA in food communication from the University of San Raffaele. She taught English, translation and public service interpreting at the University of Bologna from 1996-2019, and is currently Associate Professor at the University of Palermo. She has taught a variety of subjects related to English language/literature, translation and dialogue interpreting, and has published widely. In 2015 she set up the first multilingual continuous education course in interpreting in the legal sector at the University of Bologna; she works occasionally as a community- and legal interpreter and translator between Italian, English and Urdu. Her most recent publications include articles and books on interpreting in the workplace, legal and public-service interpreting in Italy, interpreting in the refugee setting, interpreting ethics, the interface between interpreting and philosophy, and English as a lingua franca.