

Italy as the world's chef: Italian cuisine is the most appreciated in the world.

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16 settembre 2019

Italian food culture knows no trade deficit. According to a recent paper by Joel Waldfogel of the University of Minnesota, Italy is at the top of the global food chain, at least when it comes to exporting its cuisine abroad. Italian dominance is so firmly established that Japan, placing second in this particular ranking, is worth less than a third of Italian net exports.

The author's estimates are not based upon usual trade metrics. Traditionally the exchange of goods and services is what we base our understanding of international trade. However, the culinary exchange is measured by the value of food found on restaurant table all over the world. It is thus necessary to consider cuisine as a cultural product first and as an aggregate of goods later. If this is the case, the myth of an American dominated world is largely proven untrue: the United States may be the leading force in movie production and its transatlantic counterpart, the United Kingdom, the world's largest trendsetter in music, but they are both net importers of foreign cuisine. Perhaps surprisingly, given the ubiquity of US fast-food chains, Washington is the biggest net importer.

Domestic consumption of foreign cuisine is treated as an "import", whereas foreign consumption of domestic cuisine is treated as an "export". As such Italy is the biggest trendsetter in the global food industry. This particular research is based on Euromonitor and TripAdvisor datasets and upon the assumption that not all cuisines have the same weight. Italian cuisine is the one with the most appeal worldwide, with net exports of 158 billion dollars, and Italian themselves are more than happy to consume local recipes instead of foreign ones, thus contributing to a significant home bias (78%, following Turkey and China). Including or excluding fast-food restaurants, which include pizza places abroad, is not going to change the main findings of the paper: Italy is, even more so, the largest culinary powerhouse around; the United States is still languishing at the bottom, but not dramatically so.

Sticking to a more orthodox measurement of the food industry performance, the Food Industry Monitor, an Italian research centre monitoring the performance of national food companies, noticed that the sector's growth percentage is outperforming the GDP's by three to one. This trend is also going to be stable in the following years and, in 2019, the sector-wide ROI will be above 10%. The Italian food industry is still anchored to a solid tradition, but more than half the companies operating in it are squarely oriented towards innovation. The latter are also the ones with the highest return on sales but, as a whole, the sector is still basing production entirely in Italy, thus benefiting from the huge appeal of boasting a Made in Italy certificate on its products abroad.

Sources: Dining as a cultural trade, Food Industry Monitor