



Italian Language in New York? Mission possible. Thus speaks Ilaria Costa

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Italian language and Italian culture make an inseparable pair. Ilaria Costa, executive director of the Italian American Committee on Education (IACE), speaks about this and recounts how difficult it is, in the Tristate area, to promote everything Italian through the language. It's surprising – but not surprising to us at i-Italy – that many Americans, who do not have a familial relationship with our country, are interested in studying our language. The charm of our culture penetrates America, regardless of the blood ties of its inhabitants.

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[Ilaria Costa](#) [2], executive director of the Italian American Committee on Education ([IACE](#) [3]), the managing institution in charge of teaching Italian language in the Tristate area, told us about it offering insightful clarifications and uncovering Pandora's box of universal education, language and culture...

What is the state of culture and art and the study of the Italian language in New York?

IACE hasn't only been working in the State of New York but also in New Jersey and Connecticut. Therefore, we have the finger on the pulse and are able to consider a vast range of realities inherent in teaching and in Italian culture.

From the nursery school level through the end of high school, we see a demand for more support in this area. Unfortunately, there are always cuts to research and we at IACE look to provide a temporary fix to the situation. It's clear that these cuts are often unjustified, negative and lead to intellectual impoverishment.

Italy, on the contrary, is seen as a place where to better oneself and further one's knowledge. Many Americans are madly in love with the 'Bel Paese', 'The Beautiful Country' where the three F's reign: Fashion, Food, Ferrari...

Language, theater, music, art, cooking. What does Italian culture in the United States mean today?

Everything and more.

But culture is first of all the language. Without it, we would be unable to express ourselves and our emotions, our state of mind, thoughts or passions: language is crucial to be yourself and communicate.

The language should be promoted and conveyed through the proliferation of activities like music and theater, the Opera, a distinctive milestone of our culture, hands-on cooking lessons, cinema and reading circles to remember our glorious past and showrooms with Ferraris, just to mention some examples. These activities are preparatory to the study and incentives for a full immersion in everything Italian.

Can we put together a summary of IACE's activities?

Language and Opera

We have a program in which young children are taken backstage in theater productions. The teachers prepare them with introductory lessons, including web lessons and examining slides or other cultural programs related to the subject. The day of the theatrical performance, the children are required to have ample dialogues with actors, scriptwriters, singers, costume designers and historians of theater. They enter their lives and the reality they studied before. It's the Italian art itself that speaks.

Language and Cooking

The cooking lessons are a must. They are going well. They strike people of all ages: young children, who have crazy fun, teenagers and young adults that want to leave an impression on their partners with flavorful food, and surprisingly professionals who see cooking as a way to socialize.



Language and Ferrari

We bring the teenagers' classes, once a year, to the [Ferrari showroom](#) [4]. It is an explosion of creativity, amateur flair and brilliance: the children assemble their own, specific and unique Ferrari. Sure enough, they are able to modify the seats, rearview mirrors, the interior, the roof and the stereo, all based on their preferences... but with the Italian look always in mind.

Language and Manners

Even good manners have their relevance: more and more often they ask what topics to address in certain circumstances, and how to do it according to the customs and traditions of Italy. They ask this as though behaving in an Italian way is synonymous with guaranteed perfection.

So really everything passes as culture in our country – just know its value, appreciate it and encourage others... the rest comes on its own.

What is the difference between the given value of culture in Italy and here in America?

In Italy, there isn't an awareness of real, true and actual value. Also, here, everything is transformed into a huge economic value.

Us Italians, instead, have everything, which we don't appreciate, and cannot make money from. We cannot conceive that what we have is a plus that makes us matchlessly unique.

What is the ideal target of IACE?

One ideal target does not exist. We've realized that over time. It's true that there are Italian Americans that can be incentives to express the real culture by transmitting it through the language – but they're not the only ones.

An Italian America. It seems the most obvious target...

In reality, many learn regardless. Because of their passion for the arts, which include lyric opera, theater, music, painting and sculpture, the tradition of good food, wine and fashion. In recent times, there is a trend that encourages and truly motivates us. There are more and more people interested in Italian without necessarily having any connection with Italy, not bound by ties of blood... Many New Yorkers admire our language. Just for their pure, unique and at the same time immense pleasure to better themselves and develop the true sense of Italian that is synonymous with the culture and history of excellence.... All this, of course, makes us even prouder. We feel as if we have a very important mission to accomplish: to be the flag bearers of Italy, sometimes badly treated at home but so much appreciated here.

A well-known Italian politician once said, "We cannot live on culture." What is your opinion? How important is it to Italian-American society to preserve and encourage culture and language? Is it a growing 'investment'?

Of course we can. We can certainly live off of our culture, when you're in a country like ours you surely can! Language and culture are really on the same side because our language is derived from our history and our culture is tied into that.

And they can save us, renew us and make us stand out at the maximum levels: we are the Cradle of History, everything originated from us, from ancient Rome, from the Medici to medieval times and



the [Renaissance](#) [5], [Leonardo](#) [6], [Michelangelo](#) [7], [Donatello](#) [8] and the same with Columbus.

Not a month passes here in New York without at least one of the above-mentioned personalities being celebrated, and the list is endless. While everyone around us is aware of how rich we are in artistic culture and from an economic point of view, we are the only ones still to fully appreciate and promote our Country. What are we waiting for?

What about the Italian language in the curriculum for public schools? At what levels can it be learned?

The schools that request IACE for funding are always in the basin of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Overall, with the support of MAE, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) [9] and Ministry of Education, we finance the start-up and management of 40,000 courses each year. It is quite a challenge, I must say.

Uncertainty for the future, cuts, jobs being lost and recession are all effects of an economic crisis that bites more than ever... The language courses change accordingly becoming more affordable. How do you manage to maintain the highest quality standard of excellence during this critical time?

Here you tend to get ideas, react, find strategies that push you to perform.

We don't have another solution, certainly a magic wand would help but we don't have one. If there is no work, obviously a strong link in the chain goes missing, it's hopelessly lost.

But we strongly believe that we must know how to re-invent ourselves, in order to be able to attend everyone's needs, with dynamic initiatives and focused insight.

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