

Isn't It Authentic?

George De Stefano (May 01, 2009)



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When it comes to marketing Italian food, "authentic" is the advertiser's favorite come-on; there's no better way to seduce consumers than to invoke authenticity, in sound and image. Even when the word itself isn't used, the authentic nature of whatever food product is being hyped typically informs the ad campaign so that potential customers will believe the product is "real" Italian food, something that "real" Italians would eat.



But the authenticity of these ads and the products they promote is much like a drag queen's "realness" - a construction, a performance. The performance may be more or less compelling, depending upon the skill of the marketer or the drag artiste. But while no one believes that the bewigged man lypsyching "Gypsies Tramps and Thieves" is "really" Cher, advertisers need you to believe that their simulacra of cucina italiana are the real thing.

Consider some marketing campaigns for Italian, or rather, Italianesque, fast foods. In 2005, Papa John's International, the Kentucky-based chain founded by a paisan named John Schnatter, introduced something called the "Sicilian Meats Specialty Pizza." The pizza was topped with four meats -- salami, pepperoni, "spicy Italian sausage," and one that isn't at all Sicilian, or even Italian -- linguica sausage, a Portuguese specialty.

The "Sicilian Meats" pizza, despite its name, was pure americanata - excessive, even gross. But invoking Sicily, or some idea of Sicilian cuisine, constituted what the ad industry would call the "aspirational" aspect of Papa John's marketing campaign. Meaning, that the company wanted you to believe that its greasy, high-sodium atrocity offered an authentic taste of Sicily.

Four years later, Papa John has phased out its Sicilian Meats pizza; it's apparently standard practice for the chain to introduce a new "specialty" pie every few years. Papa John has moved on to another Italian region. The company now markets a "Tuscan Six Cheese" pizza, which "is topped with an authentic six-cheese blend of mozzarella, Parmesan, Romano, Asiago, provolone and Fontina." Ah yes, authentic "parmesan."

But for disingenuous appeals to authenticity, you can't beat Pizza Hut. The chain now is advertising its line of "Tuscani" pastas as so authentic that they win over sophisticated New Yorkers and Italians in Italy.

The New York commercial purports to show customers, filmed without their knowledge, "Candid Camera"-style, enjoying the fare at a Manhattan ristorante called Tuscani. Dopo cena, the diners are told that they've been eating Pizza Hut pasta. And guess what -- they just love the stuff! It's so good they can't believe it's Pizza Hut!

"Tuscani" of course is totally ersatz -- the restaurant, the name, and the pasta. There is no restaurant in New York called Tuscani. The ad actually was shot in Provence, a now-defunct French eatery. A spokesman for BBDO Worldwide, the agency that produced the commercial, said, "We intentionally did not reveal the name and instead outfitted the restaurant as 'Tuscani' to reinforce our new product launch." The sophisticated urban diners in the ad are actors.

Michael San Filippo, the webmaster of [About.com's Italian language site](#) [2], notes that "Tuscani" has "absolutely nothing to do with the Italian province of Tuscany ...except that it's a homophone..."

But San Filippo's really outraged that this fake Italian name is attached to a spurious product line



that includes one dish – bacon mac ‘n cheese – whose connection to Italy is remote, to say the least: “Most certainly the blatantly misspelled take-out pasta has never appeared in a legitimate restaurant in Tuscany, Italy nor has it been prepared in any Italian kitchen: bacon mac 'n cheese?! Meaty marinara baked Tuscani pasta in a box? Mi fanno schifo!”

Pizza Hut’s attempts to convince consumers that their mass market merda is authentically Italian reached new lows with a commercial set in a “Cooking Class, Rome, Italy.” As in the New York ad, unsuspecting people – in this case, actual Italians – are served Pizza Hut lasagna – and they can’t believe it’s Pizza Hut because it’s just so good and...authentic. If you’ve seen this ad, you may appreciate this parody, which purports to translate the real comments of the cooking school Romans: <http://nextround.net/2009/02/25/the-pizza-hut-in-italy-commercial-accurately-translated/> [3]

[Pizza Hut in Italy](#) [4] - watch more [funny videos](#) [5]

You’ve probably seen the TV commercial for the Visa credit card that draws on several tropes of Italian authenticity. Set in what appears to be an Italian, or putatively Neapolitan pizzeria, the ad features a young, bald, and hunky pizzaiolo who, with amazing dexterity, spins and tosses the pizza dough over his upper body, while a kitchen crew of Italian-looking men watches with amused admiration. The ad’s soundtrack is Renato Carasone’s recording of “Mambo Italiano;” the song’s line, “Go, go, go, you mixed up Siciliano” synchs nicely with the pizzaiolo’s flamboyant antics.

But the commercial’s pizzeria is a set, and the pizzaiolo is Juan Hermosillo, a Chicano from California who is known for his talents as a “professional pizza tosser,” according to the ad agency that made the Visa spot. (I had no idea that pizza tossing, as opposed to pizza making, was a profession.) Hermosillo is the captain of the [US Pizza Team](#) [6],

a “group of pizza makers and dough acrobats whose goal is to bring the world's attention to the talent and camaraderie of the pizza industry.” The Team has made pizza-making into a competitive sport, with four categories of competition – “Fastest pizza maker,” “largest dough stretch,” “freestyle dough tossing,” and “Best Pizza.” Interesting that “best pizza” is the last category listed at the Team’s website.

Italian food is the most popular “ethnic” cuisine in America. The ads I’ve discussed here -- and others I haven’t, like those for the Olive Garden restaurant chain – aim to exploit that popularity, and the desire for the “real thing,” to sell bastardized versions of cucina italiana. Or, like the Visa ad, to associate Italian foodways with affluent, consumerist lifestyles. Others, like the commercials for Barilla Pasta, feature romanticized images of Italy and Italian family life, accompanied by Andrea Bocelli’s pop-operatic warbling.

None of this is “authentic.” But the mediated ethnicity of these ads does tell you something about how Italian food, Italians, and italianità figure in the American imaginary. Italians are an exuberant, fun-loving (but “family-oriented”) breed, and their irresistible food is the cynosure of their appealing way of life. A stereotype, to be sure, but indisputably more benign than that other, all too familiar one.



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