

The Invention of Tradition : The Case of *Pasta* , a Symbol of Italian Identity

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Abstract: Local food is generally regarded by Italians as one of the most representative aspects of their national identity, a feeling that can sometimes lead to real forms of patriotic fervour, if not even open chauvinism. But if, on one hand, the Italian gastronomic universe includes many regional and local components which are not reducible to a single tradition and to a few stereotyped dishes; on the other hand, Italians' collective passion for their "own" cuisine makes reference to a well-defined and limited *imaginarium* which finds in *pasta* its most representative element. Why? How does pasta emerge as a Value-Object that can seduce the Subject ("Italians"), making them—as Roland Barthes (1977) would say—"fall in love" with their country? And what are the values with which this Object is invested? Focusing on advertising, which is both the mirror and generator of sociocultural values, and building on the semiotic analysis of some relevant case studies, this paper aims at pointing out how collective passions and representations are produced and enhanced by mass media and their discourses.

Key words: pasta, identity, *imaginarium*, advertising, semiotics

传统的生成：意大利面何以成为意大利人民族认同的象征？

西蒙娜·斯坦诺

摘要：意大利人多把本土食物视为民族认同最具有代表性的方面，这种

感受有时会导向真实的爱国热情。然而，如果说意大利的美食图谱包含了诸多地区性的、地方性的成分，这些成分不能被简单地视为某种单一的传统或为数不多的传统菜系，那么另一方面，意大利人对他们“自己”的美食的集体热情暗示了一种明确而有限的想象，而意大利面则是这种想象最典型的体现。意大利面何以成为，又是如何成为一个价值对象，使得主体（意大利人）如罗兰·巴尔特所说的那样，“爱上”他们国家？这一对象被赋予了什么价值？本文探讨了广告这一社会文化价值的镜像和催生器，对一些相关案例进行了符号学分析，旨在揭示出大众媒体及其话语是如何生产并加强了集体的热情和表现。

关键词：意大利面，认同，想象，广告，符号学

I. Introduction

“*Macaroni*, you provoked me, and I’ll destroy you now, *macaroni*. I’m gonna eat you, ahmmm” (Vanzina 1954). With these words, Nando Moriconi, the *American in Rome* of Steno’s movie^①, temporarily abandons his infatuation with the American way of life to fully *re-discover* his Italian identity in his relationship with food. Local food, in fact, is generally regarded by Italians as one of the most representative aspects of their national identity, a feeling that can sometimes lead to real forms of patriotic fervour, if not even open chauvinism. But if, on one hand, the Italian gastronomic universe includes many regional and local components which are not reducible to a single tradition and to a few stereotyped dishes; on the other hand, Italians’ collective passion for their “own” cuisine makes reference to a well-defined and limited *imaginarium*^② which finds in *pasta* its most representative element.

① *An American in Rome/Un americano a Roma*, Steno, 1954, Italy.

② The term *imaginarium* is here used to refer to the socially shared depository of images—or, more generally, of *figures*—which comprises part of a cultural *encyclopaedia* (cf. Eco 1975; 1979; 1984) directing and regulating its imaginative paths according to the dual dimension of an “internal *imaginarium*” (intended as a “cultural pattern for the production of images and figures,” Volli 2011: 35 [translation of mine]) and an “external *imaginarium*” (conceived as a “material system of production and storage of [these] images,” Volli 2011: 35 [translation of mine]). Several works have investigated the term and its meanings, which are not easy to define; in particular, cf. Leone 2011: *passim*).

Why? How does pasta emerge as a Value-Object that can seduce the Subject (“Italians”), making them—as Roland Barthes (1977) would say—fall in love with their country? And what are the values with which this Object is invested?

II. Italians and Pasta: a Brief Historic Outline

Pellegrino Artusi’s *Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well* (1891) represents the first formal attempt to unify the various culinary traditions of the Italian peninsula and to create “a national identification code” (Camporesi, 1970: XVI) which, while not erasing the specific regional features, translates the different local food dialects into a common language. In such national language, pasta does not seem to play a key role: Artusi hints at the Italian passion for *macaroni*, but he explicitly refers to pasta in only two recipes (“with béchamel sauce” and “with breadcrumbs”).

Similarly, if we refer to the history of Italian cuisine—or, rather, cuisines—we see that pasta “was for a long time a food among many others” (Capatti and Montanari, 1999: 66, [translation of mine]): only between the 17th and 18th centuries did its consumption begin to spread widely, and we have to wait until the post-unification period (1880–1920) and the mass emigration to the United States of America for its election as symbol of Italian identity. Before 1700, pasta could be found in some Italian regions—such as Liguria and Sicily—but it was a food for small, privileged groups of people. The change came with the so-called “Neapolitan Food Revolution”: “the application on a mass scale of a previously existing technology until then exclusively limited to the handcrafted universe probably allowed the development of the first ‘modern’ food in our country,” as Peppino Ortoleva (1992: 11 [translation of mine]) states. As a consequence of the food crisis of those years, in fact, it was decided to avoid the high costs of transportation of leafy vegetables (the so-called “foglia”)—a poor, aqueous and highly perishable foodstuff which previously formed the basis of popular Neapolitan diet—replacing it with a dry and easily storable food product: *wheat*, which is an ingredient that, mixed with water, could be easily transformed into a nutritious low-cost food dough.

The Neapolitan food revolution then slowly spread to other regions and, gradually, from metropolitan areas to rural ones. But it was only with the Italian emigration in the early 20th century that pasta started to be considered the “Italian” food *par excellence*. By virtue of its *adaptability* and *modularity*, that is, its “tendency to be combined with a high number of dressings, sauces and ingredients, and so to match fields even quite different from the original one” (Galli della Loggia, 1998: I [translation of mine]), pasta became the main symbol of identity of Italian communities in the United States. “Unlike other immigrated groups, such as Irish, who were very cohesive thanks to Catholicism, or the Jews, who were unified by their religious endogamy, the religion of the migrated Italians consisted in ‘domesticity’.” (La Cecla, 1998: 55–56 [translation of mine]) This value then came to be represented by *pasta*, “the most accurate artefact of a home cooking” (La Cecla, 1998: 56 [translation of mine]), which requires a certain degree of knowledge on cooking times and methods of preparation. As La Cecla states, pasta became the “flag” under which a whole nation found a shelter where to protect its fragile identity (1998: 58).

If “identity is defined even (or perhaps especially) as a *difference*, that means in relation to others” (Capatti and Montanari, 1999: VIII [translation of mine]), then pasta, the essential feature of an identity that must be claimed and somehow protected from external interferences, is no exception. It has become one of the most common symbols of Italian identity, which comes to be firmly associated with a universe of values centred on the basic ideas of *domesticity*, *authenticity*, *tradition*, and *conviviality*.

III. From History to Collective Imaginary

Beyond the historical and material variables that have led to the creation of a certain Italian culinary imaginary, it is interesting to investigate what happens in terms of *signification*, analysing how pasta comes to embody the values of “Italian identity”, thus creating the conditions for that “conformity of essence” between Subject and Object of the passion that Roland Barthes described as central for the *Lover’s Discourse* (1977): “I want to be the other, I want the other to be me, as if we were united, enclosed within the

same sack of skin.” (ET, 1979: 127–28)

In such a perspective, it is very important to consider the language of advertising, which is both the mirror and generator of similar values. The objective of this article is precisely to analyse how, in the context of advertising discourses, different forms of representation and promotion of pasta are associated with particular *mises-en-scène* of “Italian identity.” Specifically, in what follows we will consider some audiovisual campaigns promoting *Barilla*, the world leader in the pasta market.

1. Barilla, the “Traditional” Italian Pasta

The Barilla brand was created in 1877, when Pietro Barilla opened a bakery in the city of Parma. After initial difficulties, the small enterprise started to grow, becoming, in 1910, under the direction of Pietro’s sons Gualtiero and Riccardo, the first factory equipped with a continuous furnace, employing eighty workers. Immediately realising the importance of advertising, the two brothers gave rise to a trend that, over the years, had led the Parmesan company to collaborate with leading Italian and international artists to create calendars, posters, packaging and eye-catching audiovisual commercials. With Pietro (the founder’s grandson), the advertising and marketing strategy of the brand came to a turning point: pasta, originally a “humble” product, became a real *object of worship*, as it represented “a simple and genuine Italy, made of refined and genuine things” (Rai Educational, 2011 [translation of mine]).

Leaving aside the printed advertising production, this article will focus on some audiovisual commercials commissioned by Barilla, which represent a decisive stage of this process of establishing pasta as the symbol of Italian identity.

2. The First Carosello (1958): Giorgio Albertazzi and Dante

A few months after the first *Carosello*^① in 1958, Barilla decided to

① Carosello (Italian for “carousel”) was an Italian television advertising show, broadcast on RAI-Italy’s national public TV from 1957 to 1977. It generally included short sketch comedy films or other entertainment shows followed by commercials.

commit the advertising of its products to television. This gave birth to the first Barilla *Carosello*, hosted by Giorgio Albertazzi, who, after reciting the famous sonnet from Dante Alighieri's *Vita Nova* *Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare* ("So gentle and so honest she appears", 1292 – 1293), presented Barilla's new gluten pasta, introduced by a cheerful group of children of different ages dancing around a huge box of pasta. The decision to have a sonnet by Dante Alighieri, the "father of the Italian language", thereby suggests that Barilla pasta is also to be understood as representing quite essential Italian spirit.

Another relevant factor is the logo that introducing the *Carosello*. Its roundish font, combined with the choice to put the Barilla logo inside of an ellipse, which is in turn surrounded by a "bright" spiral, simultaneously both evokes the image of an egg (the basic ingredient of the product) and announces the *Ring a Ring o' Rose* hat will take place in the final scene.



Figure 1 Barilla Logo and Children Dancing, *Carosello*, 1958 (© Barilla)

An interesting parallelism on the topological level is thereby established, with the creation of a relationship, describable in terms of the oppositions between circumscribing/circumscribed and peripheral/central, between the spiral-circle of children and the logo-product. This stresses the importance of Barilla, whose logo is in this way inextricably linked to the two terms used in the second image to describe the contents of the box ("gluten pasta"), as well as to the figure of the child. Childhood, an element that is at the same time circumscribing-peripheral and central-circumscribed, plays a central role in the commercial, as clarified by the voiceover ("A safe food product for children and all stages of life") and the children's choir ("We are healthy babies, do you know why? / Our mom found it! / She gives us the new

Barilla pasta / that is gluten pasta.” Barilla, 1958 [translation of mine]). This leads one to remark on the strong *practical* valorisation (cf. Floch, 1986 and 1990) of the product: Barilla is praised for its nutritive capacity (as it can provide the body with the energy it needs to grow in a healthy way) — that is, it is presented in accordance with those *use values* (Floch, 1986 and 1990) that make it a “safe food product for all stages of life” (Barilla, 1958 [translation of mine]). This idea is further enhanced by the hyperbolic exaggeration of the size of the box of pasta, which assumes gigantic proportions, reaffirming the importance of the product for proper nutrition and children’s growth and investing then Barilla pasta with that “miraculous” nature described just before in the verses of Dante recited by Albertazzi: “and it seems a thing that has come from heaven to earth to show forth a miracle.” (Alighieri 1292–1293, [1863]: 81)

3. The Commercial *High Society* (*Alta società*) —*Rigatoni Barilla* by Fellini

In the commercial *High Society* (*Alta società*) —*Rigatoni Barilla* by Federico Fellini (1986), a refined and seductive lady, after examining a rich menu of dishes with resounding French names, orders, winking at the maître, a portion of *Rigatoni*. The waiter then responds “Ha... So we echo: ‘Barilla.’” Afterwards, while a series of concentric circles (the reference is again to the egg, as well as to the idea of perfection expressed by the circular shape) that light up in succession invades the shot, the other guests of the restaurant repeat “Barilla” in unison, strengthening the echo effect announced by the waiter. This is the denial of those use values exalted in the previously analysed *Carosello*: pasta Barilla is no longer presented as a nutrient food product necessary to grow healthy and strong, but as an object of luxury and refinement. And for this reason it is preferred to the common dishes of a cuisine generally recognized as one of the most prestigious in the world (the French one). The intention, therefore, is to dignify pasta, which emerges no more as a plebeian (as its origins are) product, but a “chic”, high-class food,

subjected to a *ludic* or *aesthetic* (cf. Floch, 1990) valorisation. *Perspective*^① (cf. Ferraro, 1998) heroine of the commercial, the woman refuses any external and pre-established definition, going against the tide and bringing the entire group of guests to a kind of orgiastic ecstasy which, in turn, makes them repeat in unison, as if they had been struck by a kind of “enlightenment”, the name of the brand-deity, *Barilla*.



Figure 2 The Commercial *Alta Società* by Fellini, 1986 (© Barilla)

4. “Where There is Barilla There is a Home”

In the late 80s and early 90s, Barilla commissioned a series of commercials called *Dove c'è Barilla c'è casa* (“Where there is Barilla there is a home”), characterized by the presence of the jingle *Hymn* by Vangelis.

(1) *The Little Girl with the Yellow Raincoat* (1987)

In the first commercial of the series, a little girl just got out of school, having missed her bus, starts to walk towards her house protected from the rain by a yellow raincoat. Meanwhile, a woman (presumably her mother),

① Building on the opposition between the *subjective* level, which is related to the Subject, and the *objective* level, which stresses the socially and inter-subjectively recognised values, as well as on the contrast between the *relative* and *absolute* axis, Guido Ferraro (1998) identifies four *discursive regimes*. In the *causal* regime the emphasis is put on objective facts, and what one does defines what one is. The *positional* regime is based on the subject, whose actions are defined by his same essence; this is the realm of tradition and socially recognised roles. The third discursive regime is the *perspective* regime; the “perspective hero” is someone who does not accept any external definition, going against socially established roles and values and acting according to his own feelings and nature. The *multi-perspective* regime, finally, identifies the “seducer”, the one who is able to be for others what they want him to be. In Ferraro’s view, in fact, seduction is essentially an interpretative process, which consists in grasping other people’s desires and breaking into their narrative programs as a value-object.

while waiting for her husband (who will appear shortly afterwards) and her daughter, is cooking pasta. The camera then moves to the clock and the worried expression of the two parents: it is almost one o'clock in the afternoon (Italian lunch time!) and their daughter has not returned home from school. Along the way, in fact, the child finds a lost kitten and she stops to put it under her raincoat and take it home with her. Suddenly, the man sees the daughter from the kitchen window and he goes with his wife to the door. Here their worried and almost reproachful expression immediately makes room for a moment of hilarity: the little girl extracts the kitten from the raincoat and smiles looking at the mother, who, returning the smile and inviting them to enter. The commercial then closes with the scene of the woman placing on the ground a bowl of milk to feed the little cat and then hugging her daughter, while in the background the father brings to the table a dish full of pasta. Finally the tagline “Where there is Barilla there is a home”, reiterated by the voice-over, appears on the screen, followed by the logo Barilla (updated, but always shaped to make reference to the egg).



Figure 3 Commercial *The Little Girl with the Yellow Raincoat*, 1987 (© Barilla)

An interesting element which clearly emerges in the commercial is the chromatic rhyme between the yellow colour of the child's boots and raincoat, of the bus, and of pasta (both the one shown on the packaging and the actual one, cooked by the woman), which gives a sense of continuity to the

represented scenes and helps to put the emphasis on the product, linking it to the message expressed by the slogan. As a result, we have a *utopian* (cf. Floch, 1990) valorisation of pasta, whose exalted *basic* values are conviviality, family, and hospitality. The mini-story that is presented, whose beginning is characterised by scenes of solitude (the little girl who loses her bus and walks alone on the street, in the rain, and the abandoned kitten meowing for help), has a happy ending, due to those basic values that make Barilla, and more generally, pasta, the incarnation of the house, as it is generally conceived in Italian culture: home, protection, love, and joy of staying together.

(2) *Travels and Fusilli* (1988)

A man, surrounded by his children, is packing his case (so that we can understand that in a short he will leave). Then the product appears, as the voice-over says: “Fusilli Barilla. Made to tie together the finest flavours of your kitchen” (Barilla, 1988 [translation of mine]). So the camera moves back to the man and his family, shot while eating together and then on their way to the airport. When they are in the car, his daughter furtively enters *fusilli* (which is a particular type of pasta) in his jacket pocket, then giving a smile of complicity to her brother. After saying goodbye to his family, the man appears alone in a hotel room, while sadly looking out of the window. This is the moment when, finding *fusilli* in his pocket, he smiles, smelling the piece of pasta. Then the voice-over—as always, with the logo in superimposed—comes in to say: “Where there is Barilla there is a home.”



Figure 4 Commercial *Travels and Fusilli*, 1988 (© Barilla)

It is very interesting, first of all, to consider the contrast between the warm colours of the early scenes, in which the man is happily surrounded by his family, and the cold colours of the final ones, in which the man is alone and sad. Cold colours, however, also refer to the usual packaging of Barilla: a packaging on which, such as in the commercial, suddenly breaks in the warm colour of pasta, which, unexpectedly found in the jacket pocket, makes the man feel at home and close to his family (to which also the wedding ring at the man's ring finger refers), despite the miles of distance. Finally, the slogan comes to argue that, regardless of one's physical location, Barilla makes it possible to feel at home.

(3) *Pasta and Conviviality* (1992)

The commercial opens at an airport, with the arrival of a Cambodian girl, accompanied by a flight attendant, and a man and a woman (probably her adoptive parents) who are waiting for her and cheerfully receiving her. The joy of the two adults, however, does not match that of the child, who appears rather lost and sad. Then we see the scene of a phone call to home, where an old lady surrounded by some children responds with joy to the phone. Suddenly the voice-over breaks in, saying "Spaghetti Barilla adds flavour to a new romance" (Barilla, 1992 [translation of mine]). Finally, the characters are sitting at the table, where the grandmother has just placed a pan full of *spaghetti* with tomato sauce and basil. The child enigmatically looks at the fork, a tool probably totally unknown to her, so the other child shows her how to use it, sucking with joy the last *spaghetti* from the just taken forkful. Then she imitates him, fully integrating the hilarity of the scene with a big smile. Finally the slogan and the logo can appear, reminding, thanks to the usual voice-over, that "Where there is Barilla there is a home" (ibid.).

Again, the contrast between warm and cool colours, now presented in alternating scenes, refers to the opposition between conviviality, community, and harmony, on the one hand, and loneliness and melancholy, on the other one. The first one is the case of the family gathered around the table or in other places (e. g. the airport). The second one is that of the little child, just introduced to a new and unknown world. Here again pasta breaks in to unify colours and moods, melting the initial coldness and marking the triumph

of those basic values identified in the previous case: conviviality, sharing and joy of staying together. Such values are strong enough to erase not only the physical distance, as we saw in the case of *fusilli*, but also cultural differences.



Figure 5 Commercial *Pasta and Conviviality*, 1992 (© Barilla)

Finally, it is also very interesting to note the tricoloured flag identifiable in the baking dish brought by the grandmother, which refers to the Italian tradition, stressing the *utopian* valorisation of the product, and making manifest the *positional* regime of the commercial. We assist to a situation where *one does what one is*, and what one is is “Italians”, that is cheerful and friendly people, whose table and hearts are always open to the “Other”.

5. The Commercials with Mina: *Family, Friendship, and Joy of Staying Together*

In 2009, Barilla entrusted the voice of its advertising campaigns to Mina, one of the icons of Italian music and culture.

It is very interesting to analyse the commercial dedicated to family: the commercial opens with a shot of some clothes and a teddy bear hanging out to dry. Meanwhile the singer’s voice-over says: “It is our starting line; it is the family. Sometimes it protects you; sometimes it supports you. Sometimes you cannot wait to have one; sometimes you try to escape from it. You think that alone you will go further, but when you’re there in the middle of your family, you realize that, to be truly free, you must have roots. *Lasagne Emiliane Barilla*, the joy of staying together.” (Barilla, 2009 [translation of

mine]) In the mean time, a series of scenes of familiar hilarity among more or less young people appear on the screen, leading to the last image, which depicts these characters all gathered around a table and the dish of pasta still steaming that the head of the family is putting on it. Then a red line surrounds them, stressing the importance of the friendly, relaxed atmosphere that has been created and announcing at the same time the logo Barilla, which will appear shortly afterwards.

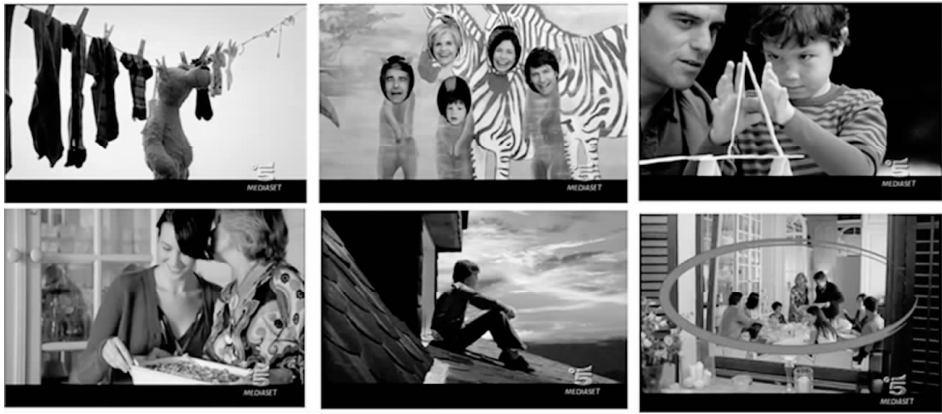


Figure 6 *Family, friendship, and joy of staying together*, 2009 (© Barilla).

Again, therefore, the emphasis is put on the values of conviviality and the “joy of staying together”, as well as on tradition (the “roots”). Such tradition, however, is able to link the past, the present, and the future, as evidenced by the inclusion in the commercial of characters from different generations and the red ellipse that comes to surround them all, in addition to what is stated by the voice-over: it is precisely from the roots and family that can come individual freedom.

Here, then, Barilla emerges as the true Subject of the advertisement, marking the transition from the *positional* to the *multiperspective* regime, as Guido Ferraro (1998) would say: able to be for others what they want it to be, pasta meets different ages and desires, solving quite insuperable value oppositions and collecting at the same table both those who cannot wait to have a family and those who do not want anyone. Hence the equation presented in the final part: Barilla, seducer subject able to conciliate all, is

reason and essence of that typically Italian “joy of staying together” celebrated by the hilarity of the final scene and by the tagline.

IV. Conclusions

Which forms of Italian spirit or identity, then, emerge from the so far described representations and valorisations of pasta? And how do similar combinations take place?

We have seen that, with the exception of the first two cases, the valorisation chosen for the advertised product is the *utopian* one: rather than on the basis of use values, pasta Barilla is celebrated according to the basic values of conviviality, sharing, and joy of staying together. It is crucial, in this sense, the figure of the house and the family, often recurring in the commercials analysed not only in their concrete manifestations (the space of the house, the wedding rings, the table, the family gathered around it), but also with reference to the ideas of domesticity, simplicity, and tradition.

But if, on the one hand, it is stressed the importance of roots, using a *positional* discourse (cf. Ferraro, 1998) that links the Italian traditional values of hospitality, family and domesticity; on the other hand, the intention is rather to highlight the relevance of spheres of values such as individual freedom, exclusivity, and sophistication.

After all, not necessarily must these two sides be in mutual opposition. As Franco la Cecla reminds, in fact,

the Italian case is [...] unique. His “modest”, home-made nature makes [...] the Italian cuisine [...] a cuisine that becomes at one point “Haute Cuisine” by exaggerating its “simplicity”, “soberness”, its *simple living* (1998: 73 [translation of mine]).

At this point, therefore, it should not surprise too much the combination established between pasta and class restaurants in the commercial by Fellini (cf. § 2. 3).

And with regard to the conflict between the individual and the family, tradition and innovation, old and new generations, however, it seems to be functional, as we have seen, to express the seductive extent of the product:

capable of grasping the desires of other people and breaking into their narrative programs (cf. Greimas, 1966) as a value-object (Ferraro, 1998), pasta emerges as a seducer subject that is in constant fluctuation between use and basic values, objective and subjective dimension, absolute and relative positions. This leads to a situation that could be described making reference to what Roland Barthes describes as the moment of love encounter: “a gradual discovery (and a kind of verification) of affinities, complicities, and intimacies” in which “at every moment, [one] discover[s] in the other another [oneself]” (1977: 198–99).

A moment when the same previously mentioned Nando Moriconi, having fallen in love with the American way of life, recognising American food as a “rubbish” for cats, mice, and bugs, *re-discovers* himself as fully Italian while eating the *macaroni* cooked by his mom. A moment when the entire Italian community emigrated abroad, having to redefine itself as well as to define itself to the eyes of the Other, *re-discovers* its identity in pasta and in the universe of values in which its preparation as well as its consumption are inscribed: the tradition, the joy of staying together, domesticity, simplicity, sharing, and the ability to adapt to changeable situations. Because we should not forget that, “such as language, food defines man in his appropriation of himself and of the world surrounding him” (Marin, 1986: 30 [translation of mine]).

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