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## Italy's *TrueItalian* Campaign Highlights Authentic Foods and Wines

### Background and History

For centuries, Italian foods and wines have set the standard for flavor and quality. Food lovers and wine aficionados the world over prize authentic, uniquely Italian ingredients that form the basis of Italy's culinary and cultural heritage.

In an effort to combat a flood of misleadingly labeled products—often Italian “look-alikes” or “sound-alikes”—that seek to capitalize on Italy's superior reputation, Buonitalia SpA in collaboration with the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, has launched *TrueItalian*, an awareness and education initiative designed to highlight the distinctive flavors and unsurpassed quality of authentic Italian foods, protect the reputation of the Italian brand and support the farmers, vintners and artisans who have built Italy's reputation for excellence. The campaign aims to improve understanding at a global level regarding the specific, unique characteristics of genuine Italian products and help consumers identify those products that legitimately qualify as authentic Italian.

The *TrueItalian* campaign was introduced in North America during the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics where the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry hosted a summit of leading international food professionals at Casa Italia, the headquarters of the Italian Olympic team. The two-day summit featured panel discussions focused on issues of authenticity—from an expanded definition of local and sustainable to food counterfeiting and the epidemic of imitation Italian products awash on the U.S. market. The first such gathering of its kind in the United States took place in Seattle, Washington in November 2010. A second summit followed in San Francisco January 2011 with a third planned for in Las Vegas in the coming months.

Although targeting all consumers, the *TrueItalian* campaign emphasizes the 30+ million Americans who self-identify as food enthusiasts and who tend to be more savvy and sophisticated in their selection and consumption of food and wine. Research undertaken by Buonitalia SpA reveals that even these “foodies” often lack the knowledge to recognize authentic Italian products.

Through the efforts of the *TrueItalian* campaign, Buonitalia SpA, the Rome-based government agency responsible for promoting, internationalizing and safeguarding Italian agricultural products, aspires to provide support to Italian food and wine producers and help reinforce Italy's competitive capacities in the global marketplace.

Not all cheese sold as “Parmigiano-Reggiano” or wine labeled “Prosecco” is the authentic product of Italy. The *TrueItalian* campaign hopes to convey the real and significant difference.

## Identifying True Italian Products

The numbers are startling. According to Coldiretti, the Italian Farmers Union, as many as 7 out of 10 foods sold in North America as authentic Italian are imitations including 97 percent of “Italian” pasta sauces and 76 percent of canned tomatoes. The production of faux Italian cheeses in the U.S. has almost tripled in the last 20 years, says the Union, and only about 2 percent of Italian cheeses marketed in this country today are actually from Italy. Other products are suspect too, including meat, wine, vinegar, olive oil and numerous others.

Often of inferior quality and flavor, these imposters not only cheapen the Italian brand, they cause significant harm to the Italian economy and threaten the livelihood of the small producers and family farmers that make up a majority of Italy's food delivery system. Sleight of hand ranges from “Italian-looking” and “Italian-sounding” packaging, misleading product claims and clever substitutions to outright fraud.

There is no viable substitute for authentic Italian foodstuffs, according to Buonitalia SpA, which boast their distinctive flavor and taste as the result of characteristics specific to their place of origin, including climate, terrain and precise, centuries-old production techniques. *TrueItalian* products are also safe and naturally nutritious; the products must meet Italy's rigorous standards for quality and purity, and natural raw materials are strictly regulated by their territory of origin, fully traceable and government-certified.

How can consumers be sure they are purchasing true, authentic Italian products? The European Union (EU) has created through legislation quality designations to protect the reputation of specific regional foods, assist farmers and offer consumers guarantees of quality and authenticity. These products must meet specific requirements to carry the EU quality symbol or logo.

**PDO—Protected Designation of Origin** identifies products whose production, preparation and processing must take place in a specific geographic area. These products have proven

characteristics resulting solely from the terrain (e.g. raw materials, climate, soil quality) and the local knowledge and often centuries-old traditions of the producers in the region (e.g. *Prosciutto di Parma*).

**PGI—Protected Geographical Indication** identifies products that have distinctive characteristics associated with a given geographical area and at least one stage of the production process carried out in that area (e.g. *Bresaola della Valtellina*).

**STG—Traditional Specialty Guaranteed** is used for products with distinctive features that either have traditional ingredients or are made using traditional methods (e.g. *Mozzarella*).

Consumers more and more want to know where their food is coming from. The EU quality designations, while varying in the strictness of specifications that products must meet, share a common goal of furthering authenticity and sustainability.

### **Striking a Balance—International and Cultural Sustainability**

What is the role of authentic foods in a culture that increasingly values locally sourced, sustainably farmed, seasonal products? This is the dilemma confronting many whose sensibility tends toward the local but whose passion is often rooted in a deep appreciation of unique, irreplaceable ingredients sourced from afar that give signature dishes a marked authenticity. The fact is sometimes people just want Parmigiano-Reggiano—the real thing.

The *TrueItalian* initiative emerges amidst a growing debate regarding the dimensions of our food system and what “local” really means. Naturally enough, the campaign advocates striking a healthy balance between the environmental imperative of relying on locally produced foods with the demand for authentic regional products of cultural and culinary significance.

While arguments continue to wage over expanding the notion of sustainability beyond food miles, a case can be made for including critical aspects of culture, heritage and agricultural economies, some of them ancient, around the world. True sustainability must consider international and cultural sustainability, which only comes from using authentic ingredients from rural towns and villages that for generations have exported their signature products to distant markets.

“Some real-deal benchmarks and standard bearers deserve to enjoy our support as part of the world’s pantry,” says Clark Wolf, internationally recognized restaurant consultant, author and James Beard Foundation award-winner who regularly addresses the latest issues surrounding

sustainable ingredients. “Sometimes a slow boat across a large ocean leaves a relatively small footprint, while its cargo helps maintain a rich and valuable culinary tradition and a local economy and is, in fact, the most efficient and thoughtful way to move important goods.”

As moderator of the *TrueItalian* summit series, Wolf leads a culinary think tank of food experts in an examination of how the new green paradigm squares with regional foodways that are the culinary mainstays of international cuisine. According to Wolf, “We’ve started the conversation about a new mix, a new way of using the most modern technology and the most ancient wisdom to build a truly sustainable construct for good food—first in North America’s abundance, and then the world.”

### Why Choose *TrueItalian*?

The authentic products of Italy are among the world’s most imitated—yet they are not easily reproduced. Why choose *TrueItalian* products?

- **Safety.** *TrueItalian* products are produced, packaged and distributed according to strict standards for processing and traceability and are certified by both government and industry authorities.
- **Uniqueness.** Italian foods are the product of centuries of culture and tradition, reflecting their region of origin and the methods by which they are produced. That care and knowledge is impossible to replicate anywhere else.
- **Biodiversity.** Italian agriculture and food production are more than a business; to Italians, food is the purest expression of culture, deeply ingrained in Italian society. The land, climate and production methods all work in combination to create foods of unparalleled quality, variety and flavor.
- **Culture and Responsibility.** *TrueItalian* products are sustainable. Over the centuries, Italian producers have learned to live in harmony with the environment, using production methods that respect and protect the land, the product, the people and their way of life.

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