

**Make sense of it all.**

Become an FT subscriber. Pay annually and save 20%.

[Subscribe now](#)

FT Series **FT Magazine's Italy food and drink special**

[Show articles](#) 

FT Magazine Food & Drink

## **Everything I, an Italian, thought I knew about Italian food is wrong**

From panettone to tiramisu, many 'classics' are in fact recent inventions, as Alberto Grandi has shown

Marianna Giusti MARCH 23 2023



## Receive free Food & Drink updates

We'll send you a *myFT Daily Digest* email rounding up the latest Food & Drink news every morning.

Sign up

Parma is quiet at night. The man sitting opposite me is paranoid someone will overhear our conversation. “They hate me here,” he explains in a hushed voice. He checks behind him, but the only other person in the *osteria* is a waitress who has had nothing to do since serving us our *osso buco bottoncini*. The aroma of roasted bone marrow wafts up from the table. Amy Winehouse’s cover of “Valerie” plays on a faraway radio.

“Can I badmouth them?” he asks. I tell him he can. After all, he hasn’t been invited here to expose corporate fraud. He has come to tell me the truth about parmesan cheese.

The man I’m dining with is Alberto Grandi, Marxist academic, reluctant podcast celebrity and judge at this year’s Tiramisu World Cup in Treviso. (“I wouldn’t miss it, even if I had dinner plans with the Pope.”) Grandi has dedicated his career to debunking the myths around Italian food; this is the first time he’s spoken to the foreign press. When his 2018 book, *Denominazione di origine inventata* (Invented Designation of Origin), started racking up sales in Italy, his friend Daniele Soffiati suggested they record a spin-off podcast.

Since its launch in 2021, their Italian-language show, called *DOI* after the book, has had three seasons and more than one million downloads. Grandi’s speciality is making bold claims about national staples: that most Italians hadn’t heard of pizza until the 1950s, for example, or that carbonara is an American recipe. Many Italian “classics”, from panettone to tiramisu, are relatively recent inventions, he argues. Some of *DOI*’s claims might be familiar to industry insiders, but most are based on Grandi’s own findings, partly developed from existing academic literature. His skill is in taking academic research and making it digestible. And his mission is to disrupt the foundations on which we Italians have built our famous, and famously inflexible, culinary culture — a food scene where cappuccini must not be had after midday and tagliatelle must have a width of exactly 7mm.

Grandi has made himself unpopular in some quarters by criticising Italy’s mighty food and drink sector, which, by some estimates, accounts for a quarter of GDP. On the podcast, he jokes he should only leave his house “with personal security guards, like Salman Rushdie”. In 2019, the Italian ambassador to Turkey reprimanded Grandi at a conference in Ankara after Grandi ridiculed Italy’s 800 protected designations, products whose quality is recognised by the EU as inextricably linked to their area. At Les Mots literary festival in Aosta in 2018, he was attacked by a Roman presenter who, offended by Grandi’s claims about carbonara, “called [him] every name in the book” in front of a dumbfounded live audience.

---

**As an Italian living abroad**, hearing a food expert say that our national cuisine, with its reputation for tradition and authenticity, is in fact based on lies feels like being let in on an unspeakable family secret that I’d always suspected. I’d always hated the hype around Italian food, whether it came from disturbingly keen foreign friends (like the New Yorker well-versed in niche regional Italian pasta recipes) or embarrassingly pedantic compatriots (such as my Neapolitan friend who refuses even to touch fresh tomatoes in the UK). I was amused, if perplexed, during the panic buying phase of the first Covid-19 lockdowns, to hear of Italian supermarket shelves being emptied of everything bar smooth penne, considered by Italians to be lower quality.

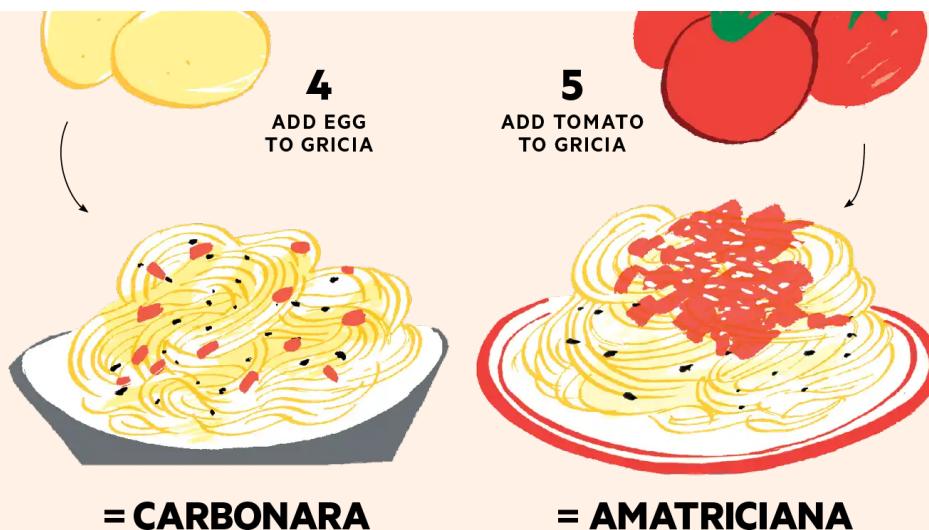
"It's all about identity," Grandi tells me between mouthfuls of *osso buco bottoncini*. He is a devotee of Eric Hobsbawm, the British Marxist historian who wrote about what he called the invention of tradition. "When a community finds itself deprived of its sense of identity, because of whatever historical shock or fracture with its past, it invents traditions to act as founding myths," Grandi says.

From about 1958 to 1963, during the economic boom that followed years of wartime poverty, Italy saw the same kind of progress that the UK had witnessed over the course of a century during the Industrial Revolution, Grandi says. "In a very short time, Italians who'd had their bread rationed were living in abundance. This level of prosperity was completely unforeseen, and to them at the time it seemed endless." The nation needed an identity to help it forget its past struggles, while those who had emigrated to America needed myths that would dignify their humble origins.

## THE SACRED PASTA

FIVE STEPS TOWARDS SIN - OR SALVATION...





The ingredients of cacio e pepe, gricia, carbonara and amatriciana. The idea is that the addition or subtraction of specific ingredients transforms one classic pasta dish into another © Joao Fazenda

Panettone is a case in point. Before the 20th century, panettone was a thin, hard flatbread filled with a handful of raisins. It was only eaten by the poor and had no links to Christmas. Panettone as we know it today is an industrial invention. In the 1920s, Angelo Motta of the Motta food brand introduced a new dough recipe and started the “tradition” of a dome-shaped panettone. Then in the 1970s, faced with growing competition from supermarkets, independent bakeries began making dome-shaped panettone themselves. As Grandi writes in his book, “After a bizarre backwards journey, panettone finally came to be what it had never previously been: an artisanal product.”

Tiramisu is another example. Its recent origins are disguised by various fanciful histories. It first appeared in cookbooks in the 1980s. Its star ingredient, mascarpone, was rarely found outside Milan before the 1960s, and the coffee-infused biscuits that divide the layers are Pavesini, a supermarket snack launched in 1948. “In a normal country,” Grandi says with a smile, “nobody would care where [and when] a cake was invented.”

Parmesan, he says, is remarkably ancient, around a millennium old. But before the 1960s, wheels of parmesan cheese weighed only about 10kg (as opposed to the hefty 40kg wheels we know today) and were encased in a thick black crust. Its texture was fatter and softer than it is nowadays. “Some even say that this cheese, as a sign of quality, had to squeeze out a drop of milk when pressed,” Grandi says. “Its exact modern-day match is Wisconsin parmesan.” He believes that early 20th-century Italian immigrants, probably from the Po’ region north of Parma, started producing it in Wisconsin and, unlike the cheesemakers back in Parma, their recipe never evolved. So while Parmigiano in Italy became over the years a fair-crusted, hard cheese produced in giant wheels, Wisconsin parmesan stayed true to the original.

In the story of modern Italian food, many roads lead to America. Mass migration from Italy to the US produced such deeply intertwined gastronomic cultures that trying to discern one from the other is impossible. “Italian cuisine really is more American than it is Italian,” Grandi says squarely.

Pizza is a prime example. “Discs of dough topped with ingredients,” as Grandi calls them, were pervasive all over the Mediterranean for centuries: piada, pida, pita, pitta, pizza. But in 1943, when Italian-American soldiers were sent to Sicily and travelled up the Italian peninsula, they wrote home in disbelief: there were no pizzerias. Before the war, Grandi tells me, pizza was only found in a few southern Italian cities, where it was made and eaten in the streets by the lower classes. His research suggests that the first fully fledged restaurant exclusively serving pizza opened not in Italy but in New York in 1911. “For my father in the 1970s, pizza was just as exotic as sushi is for us today,” he adds.

---

**When, after meeting with Grandi,** I visit my 88-year-old grandmother, Fiorella Tazzini, at home in Massa, Tuscany, she is perfectly put-together, as always, in a starched cream shirt and a black cardigan. Nonna Fiore, as her grandchildren call her, pours us some herbal tea and hands me a plate of biscuits. The tea gives off the soothing scent of lemon balm. We sit in the same spotless kitchen with its 1960s geometric-patterned curtains where, when I was child, she would sometimes give me frozen meals, winking “Don’t tell your mum!”

“I remember the first pizzeria I saw,” she recalls. “I must have been 19 or 20, in Viareggio, half an hour from home. The first time I saw a mozzarella was even later, it must have been in the 1960s; your mum was already born. It was when they opened a supermarket here.”

Mozzarella comes from the south of Italy, hundreds of miles away. To find out more, I call a friend’s Sicilian great-aunt. Ninety-five and a little deaf, Serafina Cerami answers the phone immediately. “We ate a lot of mozzarella in Sicily before the war!” she shouts down the line. Like pizza, mozzarella was fast-tracked to global fame through the funnel of mass migration to America from the Italian south.

Comparing her recollections with those of my grandmother, it’s clear that Sicily’s elevated “Sunday” dishes (aubergine parmigiana, cannoli, *pasta con le sarde*) were the ones that went mainstream, thanks to the south’s contribution to the Little Italys of the US. My grandmother, on the other hand, grew up eating *tordelli alla massese* (large fresh tortelli with a meat filling, cooked in a ragù sauce) and *cappelletti in brodo* (fresh tortelli in chicken broth), dishes that are almost entirely unknown outside the region.

Both Cerami in Sicily and my grandmother in Tuscany remember eating lots of beans and potatoes — not ingredients typically associated with Italian cooking — before the war. But a growing appreciation of the country’s poorer regional cuisines in the UK and the US has rehabilitated much of the *cucina povera*, like the Emilia region’s *gnocco fritto*, Tuscany’s *pappa al pomodoro* and northern polenta.



'This is the reason why I do what I do: to show that what we hail as tradition isn't, in fact, tradition,' says Alberto Grandi © Leonardo Scotti

For Grandi, the story of carbonara perfectly encapsulates Hobsbawm's idea of the "invention of tradition". To shed some light on this national favourite, I call Bernardino Moroni, the 97-year-old grandfather of a Roman friend. "We only had pasta on Sundays," he says on a video call from his home in Morlupo, in the province of Rome. His childhood meals were mainly *minestra*, beans and vegetables from the family's kitchen garden, he explains. When I ask him about carbonara, a supposed staple of Roman cooking, he looks away from the camera. "Maybe once a year we ate *amatriciana* [a tomato-based recipe with bacon], when we could afford to kill a pig. But I'd never heard of carbonara before the war."

That is because, as the food historian Luca Cesari, author of *A Brief History of Pasta*, puts it, carbonara is “an American dish born in Italy” and it wasn’t born until the second world war. The story that most experts agree on is that an Italian chef, Renato Gualandi, first made it in 1944 at a dinner in Riccione for the US army with guests including Harold Macmillan. “The Americans had fabulous bacon, very good cream, some cheese and powdered egg yolks,” Gualandi later recalled. Cesari dismisses myths that carbonara was the food of 18th-century Italian charcoal workers as “ahistorical”.

For Italians born after boom years, carbonara has an unalterable set of ingredients: pork jowl, Roman pecorino cheese, eggs and pepper. But early recipes are surprisingly varied. The oldest was printed in Chicago in 1952 and featured Italian bacon, not pork jowl. Italian recipes from around the same time include everything from gruyère (1954, in the magazine *La Cucina Italiana*) to “prosciutto, and thinly sliced sautéed mushrooms” (1958, Rome’s Tre Scalini restaurant). Pork jowl didn’t come to replace bacon until as recently as the 1990s.

But it is carbonara that provokes some of the most extreme culinary dogmatism. Many Italians today learn to cook it at home according to a set of rules that places it in the context of its “Roman pasta family”, alongside *cacio e pepe*, *gricia* and *amatriciana*. The idea is that the addition or subtraction of specific ingredients transforms one classic pasta dish into another, and any deviation from the rules is a matter of national interest. In 2015, the town of Amatrice issued an official statement to correct the Michelin-starred chef Carlo Cracco after he revealed he liked to put garlic in his *amatriciana*. “We are confident that this was a slip of the tongue by the celebrity chef,” the statement read. “We are certain he meant well.”

---

**There’s a dark side to Italy’s often** ludicrous attitude towards culinary purity. In 2019, the archbishop of Bologna, Matteo Zuppi, suggested adding some pork-free “welcome tortellini” to the menu at the city’s San Petronio feast. It was intended as a gesture of inclusion, inviting Muslim citizens to participate in the celebrations of the city’s patron saint. Far-right League party leader Matteo Salvini wasn’t on board. “They’re trying to erase our history, our culture,” he said.

When Grandi intervened to clarify that, until the late 19th century, tortellini filling didn’t contain pork, the president of Bologna’s tortellini consortium (a real job title) confirmed that Grandi was right. In the oldest recipes, tortellini filling is made from poultry. “This is the reason why I do what I do,” Grandi says. “To show that what we hail as tradition isn’t, in fact, tradition.”

Today, Italian food is as much a leitmotif for rightwing politicians as beautiful young women and football were in the Berlusconi era. As part of her election campaign in 2022, prime minister Giorgia Meloni posted a TikTok video in which an old lady taught her how to seal tortellini parcels by hand. This month, Meloni’s minister of agriculture, Francesco Lollobrigida, suggested establishing a task force to monitor quality standards in Italian restaurants around the world. He fears that chefs may get recipes wrong, or use ingredients that aren’t Italian. (Officially listed “traditional food products” now number a staggering 4,820.)

“

**Today, Italian food is as much a leitmotif for rightwing politicians as beautiful young women and football were in the Berlusconi era**

A Google search for “*Salvini mangia*” (Salvini eats) draws a farcical carousel of scenes: wide-mouthed Salvini devouring spaghetti, grinning Salvini tucking into a giant pizza, aproned Salvini checking rows of whole prosciutto legs, Salvini giving a thumbs-up next to a Sicilian cannoli, bare-chested Salvini grilling meat, tanned Salvini sticking a gelato cone in his mouth, sleepy Salvini biting into a Nutella toast.

These politicians understand the power of what Grandi terms “gastronationalism”. Who cares if the traditional food culture they promote is partly based on lies, recipes dreamt up by conglomerates or food imported from America? Few things are more reassuring and agreeable than an old lady making tortellini.

It wasn't always like this. “The grandparents knew it was a lie,” Grandi tells me, finishing the last of his prosecco. “The philologic concern with ingredient provenance is a very recent phenomenon.” Indeed it's hard to imagine that people who survived the second world war eating chestnuts, as my grandfather did, would be concerned about using pork jowl instead of pork belly in a pasta recipe. Or as Grandi puts it, “Their ‘tradition’ was trying not to starve.”

When asked if the obsession with a national cuisine started with the baby boomers like him, a generation that never experienced Italian cooking before the postwar period of expansion, he smiles: “Indeed, like many other things, this too is all our fault.”

Yet it can be comforting to believe in long-held traditions, both your own country's and others'. Global consumers applaud the celebrity experts of Italian food who churn out books, podcasts and TV shows in an often obsessive pursuit of “authenticity”. When the Italian chef Gino D'Acampo told off the British TV presenter Holly Willoughby in 2010 for suggesting that carbonara could be made with ham, saying “if my grandmother had wheels she would have been a bike”, the clip went viral. We both love and hate the caricature of the obsessively purist Italian chef.

Whole businesses have grown up around the myth of an ancient culinary tradition untouched by modern food fads. Like the tour companies that arrange cooking lessons with real Italian *nonnas* in their own homes. (“I got my own personal Italian granny!” a British friend told me of her holiday in Tuscany.) But this kind of fixation on tradition is inherently restrictive. As Grandi points out, a tradition is nothing but an innovation that was once successful.

**My grandmother wonders if I didn't** like her biscuits. I've only eaten one. She presents me with more options: *panforte*, *torrone*, *cantuccini*. Then she stands up slowly and fetches a cookbook dated 1967 from the crockery cupboard. We flick through it together. There are colourful *orecchiette* salads with basil, pine nuts and cherry tomatoes; sculptural heaps of spaghetti with meatballs on gleaming trays; chunks of roasted veal in skewers arranged artfully on the same plate as pappardelle. Just like the carbonaras of the 1960s, these recipes are generous and non-prescriptive. I can see in the pages all the bountiful excitement of a nation that had made it to the other side. From the breadlines and the bombs to the Marshall Plan, Vespas and buffalo mozzarella pizza.

In this same house, in the 1980s, Nonna Fiore once served some English guests lasagna, per my uncle's request. The lasagna was cooked from frozen, her story goes. Life was busy and, anyway, she had no qualms about serving a supermarket ready meal; people could only dream of such a luxury during the war. None of the guests suspected that she hadn't made it from scratch and everyone was delighted, her Italian son included. She reminds me of this, then looks up at me and winks.

*Marianna Giusti is an FT Weekend audience engagement journalist*

#### **Letter in response to this article:**

[A Marxist dispelling myths is not to everyone's taste / From John Mariani, Author, 'How Italian Food Conquered the World', Tuckahoe, NY, US](#)

---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.

---