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# Italianness in Reverse: Made in the World, Consumed in Italy

**Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi**

## Introduction

Italy's national brand is associated with style, artisanal craftsmanship, and culinary excellence—qualities encapsulated in the mystique of the "Made in Italy" label.[1] Traditionally, discussions of Made in Italy focus on what Italy exports to the world. This article flips that perspective inside-out. Instead of asking what Italy gives the world, it asks what the world has given to Italy—raw materials, images, and tastes that have been imported and then absorbed into Italian identity. Paradoxically, many products that feel quintessentially Italian are in fact the fruits of global supply chains. From durum wheat grown on the Canadian prairies to tomatoes first domesticated in Mesoamerica, from coffee beans harvested in East Africa to cotton and silk sourced from Egypt or China, foreign inputs have become the backbone of Italian goods. And the more global the supply chain, the more "authentic" the product feels—a paradox that this paper terms reverse-authenticity.[2] In a reverse-authentic dynamic, foreign materials are metabolized into national icons, so that imports are culturally Made in Italy even if agriculturally or industrially made elsewhere. The overarching argument is that Italian identity, especially in domains of taste and style, has been constructed not by isolating the local but by assimilating the global.

Three guiding questions structure the inquiry. First, what conditions have made an Italian form of aesthetic creativity and taste possible? Second, what are the main factors in the creation and success of the Made in Italy myth? Third, how have style, fashion, authorship, and craftsmanship been used to construct Made in Italy? Addressing these questions requires a blend of cultural history and theory. This paper draws on Arjun Appadurai's theory of global flows, Homi K. Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity, and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory.[3] Appadurai's concept of the "-scapes" of globalization will be extended here to what we might call culinary-scapes and material-scapes—the movements of foodstuffs and raw materials that shape Italian life. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the "Third Space" of cultural enunciation helps explain how Italy domesticated foreign matter into something "Italian," blurring the line between original and imitation. Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) urges us to follow the non-human actors—seeds, beans, bolls—as they link up farmers, merchants, artisans, advertisers, and consumers into networks that perform *italianità* (Italianness). In combination, these frameworks will help illuminate how Italy's aesthetic identity emerged through global entanglement rather than insular essence. Methodologically, the article proceeds through four strategically chosen case studies that illuminate the same structural problem from different angles: how extra-Italian materials are transformed, narrated, and stabilized as culturally Italian goods. Each case combines historical reconstruction of the commodity's arrival and naturalization in Italy with an analysis of branding, policy discourse,

[1] Marina Holma, "Made in Italy 2.0: Searching for the Characteristics of Contemporary Italian Fashion in the Context of Fashion Design Education in Italy" (MA thesis, Stockholm University, Centre for Fashion Studies, 2014). Sebastiano Brunello, "From 'Made in Italy' to 'Made by Italians': A Critical Analysis and the Cases of Two Companies in the Agri-Food Sector" (MA thesis, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2021).

[2] On the symbolic and economic role of "Made in Italy" as a high-value country-of-origin brand, see "Made in Italy," Grokipedia, accessed November 29, 2025; and Marina Holma, "Made in Italy 2.0."

[3] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

heritage claims, and everyday cultural mediation. Rather than relying on schematic visualizations, the article foregrounds historically specific narratives of transformation in order to show how italianità is produced at a point where foreign matter is reworked into recognizable forms of taste, style, and social ritual.

The four case studies are not presented as an exhaustive inventory of Italian material culture. They are selected because each makes visible, with particular clarity, a constitutive tension at the heart of Made in Italy: the raw material is non-native or substantially extra-national, the finished product is widely perceived as quintessentially Italian, and the sector occupies a privileged position within the symbolic economy of Italian taste and style. Tomatoes, durum wheat, coffee, and luxury fibers therefore function as strategic cases rather than representative totals. Other sectors such as automobiles, furniture, and interior design are also important to Italian branding, but they raise partly different questions centered more directly on engineering, industrial design, and manufacturing systems. The present article isolates those cases in which imported matter itself becomes central to the production of Italianità.

## Global Flows, Hybridity, and Networks: Theoretical Framework

There was no such thing as an isolated modern Italy; it has always been a meeting place of peoples, goods, and ideas, right in the heart of Mediterranean exchange and, subsequently, global movement. First, Arjun Appadurai's notion of global cultural flows provides a vocabulary for mapping Italy's porous cultural frontiers.[4] Appadurai theorizes that globalization is constituted by several overlapping "landscapes" or "-scapes": ethnoscapes (movement of people), technoscapes (flows of technology), financescapes (fluxes of capital), mediascapes (distribution of mass media and images), and ideoscapes (dissemination of political ideas and propaganda). In the present study, we build on Appadurai's framework by focusing on two specific flows that have been instrumental in shaping Italian identity: culinary-scapes and material-scapes. The culinary-scape is considered in relation to the worldwide movement of foods, crops, and culinary habits, and how these flows reformat eating habits and tastes. The material-scape refers to the movement of raw materials and fabrics—cotton, silk, wool, dyes—across borders and into Italian workshops. Tracking these flows underscores a key point from Appadurai: cultural identities (like Italianità) are not primordial; they are continuously shaped by these moving resources and influences.[5] Italian culture is an amalgam of what has travelled into Italy as much as what has travelled out. By following the trajectories of foods and fibers into Italy, we see Italian identity as part of what Appadurai calls the "global cultural economy," full of overlaps and hybrids.

Second, drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the "Third Space," a postcolonial lens reveals how foreign elements are re-appropriated and woven into the local fabric, no longer remaining purely "other" but becoming constitutive of a new, in-between cultural formation.[6] In his view, cultural identity always emerges as a negotiation of difference, not as a sealed repository of the past. "It is the 'in-between' space that carries the burden and meaning of culture," Bhabha writes, and by exploring that space of hybridity, one can "elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves."[7] In the Italian context, hybridity is evident in how imported foods and materials—initially marked as exotic or foreign—have been incorporated through Italian usage and storytelling into something perceived as native.

[4] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.
[5] UNCTAD, *Trends in Natural and Man-Made Fibres Trade* (Geneva: UNCTAD, 2025), 22–25. https://unctad.org/publication/trends-natural-and-man-made-fibres-trade.
[6] Bhabha, *Location of Culture*.
[7] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," *New Formations*, no. 5 (Summer 1988): 22.

The domestication of the foreign is a process of cultural translation: the tomato, for instance, went from being a Peruvian/Mesoamerican fruit to an Italian *pomodoro* (literally meaning "golden apple" in the early accounts) to a symbol of *la cucina italiana* (Italian cuisine). Rather than view Italy's adoption of foreign goods as a loss of authenticity, hybridity theory frames it as the source of new, "third" cultural forms that are distinctly Italian precisely because they are mixed. The myth of pure origins is replaced by a narrative of continuous re-creation. This theoretical stance directly challenges what we might call heritage essentialism—the belief that true Italian culture is only that which is untouched by outside influence. Many icons of Italian heritage are hybrids that "inscribe and articulate culture's hybridity" as the very basis of their authenticity.[8] Bhabha's perspective thus sets the stage for appreciating Italy's form of aesthetic creativity as one born from encounters and adaptations, rather than from isolation.

Third, Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) invites us to follow the things themselves—the seeds, grains, beans, and fibers—as active participants in the web of Italian culture.[9] Latour famously argues that non-human entities have agency within networks: in ANT, humans and non-humans are actors (or "actants") that together produce social phenomena. Instead of accounting for an effect in terms of human motives or sociocultural processes, ANT maps how the specific effect comes into being through relations between heterogeneous actors, some human and some non-human. If we think about this in the context of Made in Italy, we see that every imported ingredient or material is an actant that enrolls various allies along its path. Take the tomato seed, for example: its biological qualities, which allow it to do well in Mediterranean climes and produce flavorful fruit, "recruit" Italian farmers to grow them; its visual appeal (red!) "recruits" marketers to place it alongside a *tricolore* (the green, white, and red national flag). The seed links a network of connections that make the tomato Italy's: agronomists and merchants, chefs and advertisers, and eaters. By tracing the commodity chain, the global route from the producer to the consumer, we learn that an Italian product like espresso or pasta is not simply produced by Italian soil and blood but rather is a distributed set of human and non-human actors across continents. Italian advertisers and politicians might boast of national self-reliance, but if the Canadian wheat harvest fails or coffee prices spike, the Italian pantry and café are immediately affected—a reminder that objects often drive human agendas as much as the reverse. By considering wheat and coffee as actors, we recognize that Italy's famed food culture is co-constructed by these ingredients.[10] In sum, ANT provides a concrete way to map out the performance of Italianità: how various players (farmers, corporations, government bodies, consumers) and things (crops, machines, labels) are linked in the act of producing something that is then labeled "Italian."

The article's use of the term "myth" therefore requires a more precise definition. Myth does not mean simple falsehood; it refers to the naturalization of historically contingent social relations. In this sense, Karl Marx is indispensable, because Made in Italy depends on a commodity form that obscures the dispersed labor, extraction, and unequal exchange on which national style rests. Commodity fetishism names the process by which social relations appear as if they were properties of the finished thing itself. Walter Benjamin is equally important because the issue here is not simply the disappearance of aura under modern reproducibility but its displacement. In the world of branded commodities, aura can migrate from origin to scene, ritual, and signature: from the bean to the espresso bar, from the fiber to the finished garment, from provenance to the stylized moment of transformation and consumption. What consumers encounter as authenticity is thus not untouched origin but a socially produced aura. Read this way, Made in Italy is mythic not because it is wholly unreal, but because it converts

[8] Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," 22.
[9] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.
[10] Massimo Montanari, *Food Is Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

a historically layered and globally distributed process into the appearance of self-evident national essence. With these frameworks in mind, we now turn to the four case studies.

## The Tomato Turnaround: From New World Curiosity to Italian Staple

The question "What would Italian cuisine be without the tomato?" is almost unthinkable today, as tomatoes underlie so many Italian dishes from *spaghetti al pomodoro* to *pizza margherita*.[11] Tomatoes are a New World fruit that did not reach Europe until the sixteenth century.[12] At first, tomatoes were treated as exotic ornamental plants and were even feared to be poisonous. For roughly two centuries, the tomato was not a mainstream food in Italy. It was likely among the poorer classes that tomatoes first entered cooking pots in Italy.

The turning point in the tomato's Italian career came in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first known Italian recipe for tomato sauce was published in 1790 by chef Francesco Leonardi, and by the 1840s, recipes for pasta al pomodoro began to appear.[13] Over this period, the tomato shifted from a colonial curiosity to a beloved ingredient. By the late nineteenth century, the tomato was so entrenched in Neapolitan cooking that it helped give rise to the modern pizza. The classic pizza margherita, according to popular legend, was created in 1889 by a Neapolitan pizzaiolo to honor Queen Margherita of Savoy, with tomatoes, mozzarella, and basil arranged to mimic the red, white, and green of the Italian flag. Whether apocryphal or not, this story symbolically completed the tomato's transformation into an emblem of Italian national identity—it literally put the tomato in the flag.

Then, in the twentieth century, Italy became one of the world's largest producers and processors of tomatoes, solidifying their Italianness.[14] Nowadays, Italy is the largest tomato producer in Europe. Italian businesses ship canned tomatoes, purées, and pasta sauces across the globe, helping transport the flavors of a fruit once foreign to Italian shores. In the past, Italy's willingness to embrace new crops and its penchant for trying new foods had served as a foothold for the tomato. Sociologically, the tomato's adoption was driven "from below" by common folk, illustrating how necessity and curiosity in everyday practice can reshape a national cuisine. In 2017 this was exemplified by UNESCO's inscription of the "Art of Neapolitan Pizzaiuolo" (pizza-making) as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.[15] The UNESCO recognition emphasized the deep cultural and ritual significance of pizza-making in Naples, with scant attention paid to the fact that one of its key ingredients arrived from across the ocean. Such is the success of reverse-authenticity: the foreign becomes so fully absorbed that it is seen as an "undisputedly" Italian element of cultural heritage. This is consistent with recent critiques of UNESCO's heritage regimes, which highlight how states mobilize "intangible heritage" listings to consolidate selective, often sanitized, national narratives while effacing the transnational trajectories of the practices involved.

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[11] David Gentilcore, *Pomodoro: A History of the Tomato in Italy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 15–38; Montanari, *Food Is Culture*.

[12] Gentilcore, *Pomodoro*; Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, eds., *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

[13] Francesco Leonardi, *L'Apicio moderno, o sia l'arte di apprestare ogni sorta di vivande* (Rome: Pagliarini, 1790), 1:59–61; see also Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari, *Italian Cuisine: A Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 204–7.

[14] FAOSTAT, "Crops and Livestock Products: Tomatoes, Italy and European Union," Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, accessed November 29, 2025; Fabio Parasecoli, *Al Dente: A History of Food in Italy* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 131–35.

[15] UNESCO, "Art of Neapolitan 'Pizzaiuolo' (No. 00722)," Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, inscribed 2017, accessed November 29, 2025, https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/art-of-neapolitan-pizzaiuolo-00722.

From a theoretical angle, the tomato's story is a textbook case of Bhabha's hybridity in practice.[16] The New World fruit entered an Old World setting and, through a process of cultural translation, produced a hybrid cuisine that neither Italy nor the Americas could claim alone. It created a Third Space; think of an Italian tomato sauce, which is neither what tomatoes were in Mesoamerican use nor a mere European sauce without tomato, but something new altogether. Its hybridity was "strategically forgotten" in the sense that Italians came to see tomato-based dishes as their own ancient tradition, even while unconsciously enjoying the novelty it had once introduced. Advertisements for pasta and tomatoes often included rustic Italian icons, evoking what Roland Barthes once termed Italianicity—a recognizable set of signs that say "Italian" to the consumer.[17] Such signs rarely hint at the tomato's foreign origin; to do so would complicate the narrative of Italian authenticity. Finally, in actor-network terms, the tomato is an actant reorganized as part of Italian food networks.[18]

Here it is important to separate two kinds of agency that ANT places in the same network without equating them. The tomato did not act with intent. As an actant, it made a difference through what it is: well-suited to Mediterranean growing conditions, flavorful, and vividly red—qualities that made it available to be taken up by farmers, cooks, and eaters. The purposeful action was human: entrepreneurs in Naples built canning industries around the tomato, the Italian government promoted the nation's canning industries, and pizza was eventually declared part of the national cultural patrimony. Neither kind of agency explains the outcome alone. The tomato supplied material possibilities; human actors supplied the interests, capital, and narratives that turned those possibilities into industries and, eventually, into an emblem of national identity. The humble tomato thus acted as a pivot around which a large network of humans and institutions revolved and evolved, collectively producing an aspect of Italianità.

The tomato's naturalization in Italy was secured not only through kitchens and markets but also through popular culture. Rita Pavone's "Viva la pappa col pomodoro" (Long live bread-and-tomato soup), one of the most recognizable postwar songs associated with tomato-based peasant food, turns a humble dish into an affective shorthand for childhood, home, and vernacular abundance. What matters here is not merely the song's popularity but its cultural work: it helps convert a historically imported ingredient into an object of intimate memory and collective familiarity. In this sense, popular song acts as an additional mediator of reverse-authenticity, carrying the tomato from agrarian and culinary usage into the register of national sentiment.

In sum, the tomato case study shows how an imported raw material under specific conditions—early globalization, adoption, favorable agronomy, integration into a pre-existing grain-based diet, and symbolic appropriation through national mythology—can become a pillar of national cuisine. It speaks to our first question of what conditions have made an Italian form of aesthetic creativity and taste possible, by illustrating that Italian taste was forged through contact and adaptation. It also provides clues to the second question: one of the main factors in the Made in Italy myth is the creation of imaginary continuity, convincing consumers that something like tomato sauce is an age-old Italian tradition, even though its key ingredient was foreign. The tomato became "Italian" not through an unbroken local lineage, but through metabolizing the global into the local.

[16] Bhabha, *Location of Culture*.
[17] Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
[18] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

**Prairie Gold: Canadian Durum Wheat and the Pasta Myth**

If tomatoes are the soul of Italian sauces, durum wheat semolina is the foundation of Italian pasta—another cornerstone of national cuisine.[19] Packages of pasta frequently bear Italian flag colors and phrases like *Prodotto in Italia* (Product of Italy), and some brands market lines of pasta as *100% grano italiano* (100% Italian wheat). The reality, however, is that Italy cannot meet its own demand for wheat and has long relied on imported grain to sustain its pasta industry. Durum wheat (hard wheat ideal for pasta making) is a crop that thrives in arid continental climates, and while southern Italy grows a fair amount, the vast plains of North America—in particular the Canadian prairies—became a crucial source of high-quality durum. Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when steamships and railways made transatlantic grain trade feasible, Canada has been a major supplier of wheat to Italy. By the twenty-first century, this dependency is pronounced: Italy grows only about 60% of the durum wheat it needs for pasta production, with the remaining 40% filled by imports, mostly from Canada.[20] Canadian durum, rich in protein and gluten strength, is prized by Italian millers because in some years Italian-grown wheat (often lower in protein due to more humid conditions) cannot alone produce pasta of the desired firm texture. Thus, even as Italian pasta brands advertise authenticity and sometimes invoke "Italian wheat" for marketing, the truth is that a "100% Italian" pasta is often made by blending grains from Saskatchewan or North Dakota with domestic stock. Italian companies like Barilla, De Cecco, and others routinely purchase shiploads of Manitoba wheat—Manitoba being shorthand in Italy for strong Canadian wheat—to mill into semolina for spaghetti, penne, and other pastas.[21]

This reliance on foreign grain has not gone unchallenged. In recent years, domestic farmers' lobbies like Coldiretti have campaigned vigorously to promote Italian-grown grain and to cast doubt on imports. They have gone so far as to accuse Canadian wheat of being inferior or unsafe—claims often couched in terms of protecting the integrity of Made in Italy. In 2017, for example, Coldiretti protesters in Rome held banners reading "We don't want Canadian wheat with glyphosate," alleging that Canadian practices of using the herbicide glyphosate pre-harvest pose health risks.[22] Coldiretti's pressure was partly successful: the Italian government introduced country-of-origin labeling regulations for pasta in 2018, mandating that pasta labels disclose where the wheat was grown and milled.[23] This was intended to give an edge to pasta made wholly from domestic grain, on the assumption that patriotic consumers would prefer it. Pasta makers, however, pushed back, noting that foreign wheat is often essential for quality. As the head of the millers' association Italmopa explained, in some years, Italian wheat's protein was too low to make good pasta without blending in higher-protein foreign wheat.[24] He criticized the labeling law as a protectionist move playing on false notions of purity, arguing that it "confuses the consumer" by implying that foreign

[19] Montanari, *Food Is Culture*; Capatti and Montanari, *Italian Cuisine*.

[20] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), "Crops and Livestock Products: Durum Wheat, Italy," FAOSTAT database, accessed November 29, 2025; Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, *Canada: Outlook for Principal Field Crops, 2022–2023* (Ottawa: Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2022).

[21] Giovanni Federico, *Feeding the World: An Economic History of Agriculture, 1800–2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 152–55.

[22] Coldiretti, "Stop al grano canadese con glifosato nei porti italiani," press release, 2017; "Grano, sequestrata nave con 50 mila tonnellate di frumento canadese," *la Repubblica*, July 17, 2017; "Italy's Farmers 'Demonizing' Canadian Wheat," PO and PO Agrifish, July 11, 2017; Coldiretti, "Blitz di Coldiretti al porto di Bari contro il grano estero," press release, June 2017.

[23] Decreto Interministeriale 26 luglio 2017, "Indicazione dell'origine del grano duro per paste di semola di grano duro," *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana* 191 (August 17, 2017).

[24] Cosimo De Sortis, "Il grano importato è sicuro," Italmopa, accessed October 15, 2026, https://www.italmopa.com/il-grano-importato-e-sicuro/.

wheat is substandard when it is not. This tussle reveals a tension at the heart of the Made in Italy myth: does the authenticity of Italian pasta lie in the wheat's geographic origin, or in the process and recipe of turning it into pasta? The industry's stance is effectively that authenticity lies in Italian processing and know-how, regardless of where nature grows the grain. Coldiretti and other nationalist voices, conversely, lean toward an essentialist view that even the raw material must be Italian for the product to be truly Italian.

History complicates that essentialist view. Italian pasta culture blossomed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries precisely when global wheat trade made durum abundant and affordable. When Italy was struck by grain shortages or protectionist measures (for instance, during Fascist autarky in the 1930s), pasta production and quality suffered. When trade was liberalized, the industry boomed, and Italian pasta secured its world-class reputation. Thus, one of the main factors in the success of Made-in-Italy pasta was access to global grain markets, enabling consistent quality and quantity. Italian creativity with pasta—from the myriad shapes invented in different towns to the techniques of slow drying pasta for export—could only fully flourish with a steady wheat supply. This underscores how globalization underwrote tradition. Indeed, as one commentator noted wryly during a trade spat, "Italian pasta is already made with Canadian and American wheat"—in other words, it has been a North Atlantic co-production all along.[25]

Alongside this material history runs a symbolic one. Wheat entered Italian discourse not only as food but as political destiny. Benito Mussolini's *Battaglia del Grano* (Battle for Grain), launched in 1925, made wheat into a public idiom of sovereignty, sacrifice, and national discipline. This is crucial for the present argument because it shows that the symbolic life of grain in Italy far exceeded its agronomic reality. Even as Italian pasta remained dependent on transnational supply chains, wheat could still be staged in public culture as the substance of national self-sufficiency. The result is a revealing contradiction: the political imaginary of autarky intensified precisely where material dependence remained difficult to erase.

The contradiction between symbolic autarky and material dependence is also legible in theoretical terms: the durum wheat story richly illustrates Appadurai's financescapes and technoscapes intersecting with food culture.[26] The transoceanic grain trade (financescape) and the technology of steam shipping, silos, and railroads (technoscape) altered what Italians could deem their "daily bread." We see here how global economic forces became embedded in Italian daily life through an ostensibly national product. It also offers an actor-network view: the wheat itself is an actor that linked Canadian farmers, international commodity brokers, port authorities, Italian millers, and ultimately every Italian cook boiling pasta for dinner.[27] The network of Italian pasta is truly transnational, yet that fact largely remains invisible to the consumer enjoying a bowl of spaghetti al dente. Read through the lens of global value chain analysis, this network also reveals how Italy occupies a high-value "design and branding" node, while lower-value agricultural and processing work is distributed across other regions, a pattern characteristic of many contemporary luxury-food chains.

Italy's "design and branding" node also banks on an "Italian Sounding" reflex: a quick splash of vowel-rich names, tricolor accents, and espresso-tinged visuals is all it takes for shoppers to equate the product with top-tier quality.[28] The reflex works because, in many export markets, "Italian" has itself become shorthand for quality, the country-of-origin effect taken up in the discussion below. To summarize, the case of durum wheat and Italian pasta shows how a foreign raw material can sustain a national culinary practice and even bolster a national myth.

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[25] Luca Martinelli, "Il grano duro canadese e la pasta italiana," *Altreconomia*, no. 193 (2017).
[26] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.
[27] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.
[28] "Rethinking 'Made in Italy': Food and Wine Savoir-Faire and Storytelling in the Global Market," PRIN project description, Università di Bologna, accessed November 29, 2025.

It highlights that the conditions for Italian taste here include economic and geographic realities (Italy's climate yield limits vs. Canada's surplus), a philosophical flexibility to incorporate what works (blending grains for quality), and a sociological process of myth-making that places Italian skill at the forefront while backgrounding foreign contributions. The main factors in the Made in Italy myth visible here are (a) the genuine quality control and refinement done in Italy—e.g., centuries of refining pasta recipes, formats, and production methods—which lends credence to the label, and (b) the storytelling that continuously ties those products to Italian heritage (even if that heritage is partly "invented" or enhanced).

**Espresso Empire: An Ethiopian Bean in an Italian Ritual**

No daily ritual in Italy is more sacrosanct than the shot of espresso. Italians often start their day at the local bar with an espresso or cappuccino, usually consumed standing at the counter. Italy has sought UNESCO intangible heritage status for its espresso culture, arguing that the practice of drinking espresso is integral to Italian identity.[29] What makes this intriguing is that not a single coffee bean is grown in Italy; Italy's climate is unsuitable for coffee cultivation, and *Coffea arabica* is indigenous to the Horn of Africa in present-day Ethiopia, with coffee as a beverage spreading from the Ottoman Empire into Europe in the seventeenth century.[30]

Coffee differs here from the other case studies because it is tied not only to long-distance trade but also to Italy's own imperial history in the Horn of Africa.[31] That colonial connection should be made explicit at the outset, but it should not be overstated into a story of imperial self-sufficiency.[32] Available scholarship suggests that East African coffee was ideologically central to Fascist imperial culture while remaining materially limited within Italy's broader coffee economy: contemporaries were highly aware of "East African coffee," yet little of it was actually being consumed, and Italian East Africa as a whole accounted for only a very small fraction of Italy's total imports by the late 1930s.[33] Indeed, coffee, Ethiopia's principal export crop, declined under Italian occupation rather than flourished. The significance of colonial coffee therefore lies less in volume than in symbolic appropriation: empire allowed the regime to imagine coffee as both African resource and Italian destiny, even as Italy continued to depend heavily on non-colonial supply circuits.[34] Quantitatively, however, coffee from Italian East Africa remained marginal within Italy's overall supply structure, while Brazil and other non-colonial producers continued to furnish the overwhelming share of imported beans.[35] Hence, colonial coffee mattered disproportionately at the level of propaganda, exhibition, and

[29] Lorenzo Tondo, "Italy Seeks Unesco Heritage Status for Espresso," *The Guardian*, January 19, 2022; Ministero delle Politiche Agricole Alimentari e Forestali, "La candidatura del caffè espresso italiano tradizionale a patrimonio immateriale dell'Unesco," press dossier, 2022.

[30] Jonathan Morris, *Coffee: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), 17–36; Mark Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 3–27.

[31] Diana Garvin, "The Italian Coffee Triangle: From Brazilian *Colonos* to Ethiopian *Colonialisti*," *Modern Italy* 26, no. 3 (2021): 291–312, https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2021.26.

[32] Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "The Romance of Caffeine and Aluminum," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 244–69; Garvin, "Italian Coffee Triangle," 291–312.

[33] Garvin, "Italian Coffee Triangle," especially the section "Italian Coffee Imports. Not Ethiopia, but Brazil"; Alessio Gagliardi, "La mancata 'valorizzazione' dell'impero: Le colonie italiane in Africa orientale e l'economia dell'Italia fascista," *Storicamente* 12 (2016), table 2; Gian Luca Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero: Economia, politica e lavoro nelle colonie italiane dell'Africa orientale, 1898–1941* (Turin: Giappichelli, 2004), 258.

[34] Garvin, "Italian Coffee Triangle," 291–312; Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes. Italian Advertising under Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

[35] Garvin, "Italian Coffee Triangle," especially "Italian Coffee Imports. Not Ethiopia, but Brazil"; Gagliardi, "La mancata 'valorizzazione' dell'impero," table 2; Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero*, 258.

imperial fantasy, not as the principal material basis of Italian espresso culture.[36] A brief statistical comparison makes clear that the symbolic centrality of East African coffee far exceeded its actual share in Italy's bean supply.[37]

Nineteenth-century Italy rewrote coffee history when, in 1884, Turin entrepreneur Angelo Moriondo patented the world's first steam-powered espresso machine, launching the age of concentrated coffee. By the early twentieth century, companies were developing espresso machines that could brew coffee "espressly" to order. In 1933, Francesco Illy invented the precursor to the modern espresso machine and was an early adopter of pressurized packaging for roasted coffee to preserve aroma.[38] These inventions turned espresso into a standard product—a small shot of coffee with a layer of crema on top, extracted under high pressure and drunk quickly from a porcelain cup. Thus, the Italian contribution to coffee was in its processing, preparation, and ritualization, rather than in agriculture. Italians took a foreign commodity and the idea of the Italian coffee bar and, through innovations and cultural reframing, made it something identifiably "Italian." By the mid-twentieth century, the Italian-style espresso coffee, *caffè espresso*, became the global benchmark for sophisticated coffee consumption, even though the raw material is wholly imported. Major Italian brands like Illy and Lavazza built their identities on delivering a distinctively Italian coffee experience from beans sourced globally.[39] Italian companies use the global diversity of coffee beans to create a product they label and protect as an Italian cultural good.

The social ritual around espresso has been as crucial as technical quality to its authentic aura. The Italian coffee bar, unlike the leisurely Viennese café or the grab-and-go American coffee chain, developed its own rhythm: quick yet socially significant interactions, a shared morning habit cutting across classes. Millions of daily repetitions transformed coffee from an exotic stimulant into an emblem of Italian sociability; Rome's bid for UNESCO recognition sought to enshrine espresso as intangible heritage, a ritual of craft and togetherness poured into one tiny cup.[40] The bid highlighted precise techniques (the required crema and its ideal color and persistence) and the social functions of the espresso break. The foreign origins of the beans are irrelevant to the heritage claim; what counts is the innovation in technique and the culture of consumption that envelops it.

The coffee case underscores how Italian aesthetic creativity often lies in transformation and presentation; Italy excels at refining pleasures rather than inventing the base materials. Historically, Italy's geographical role as a crossroads meant access to exotic imports like coffee, and philosophically there was an embrace of coffee as part of the Enlightenment and social life, despite initial clerical hesitations—legend has it that Pope Clement VIII in the 1600s "baptized" coffee to make it acceptable for Christians.[41] The factors in the Made in Italy myth around coffee include a genuine history of innovation (inventing the espresso process), the development of a nationwide quality standard (through entities like the Istituto Nazionale Espresso Italiano), and export of Italian coffee culture—the proliferation of espresso machines

[36] Garvin, "Italian Coffee Triangle," 291–312; Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes*; Mia Fuller, "Preservation and Self-Absorption: Italian Colonisation and the Walled City of Tripoli, Libya," in *Italian Colonialism*, ed. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 121–54.

[37] Gagliardi, "La mancata 'valorizzazione' dell'impero," table 2; Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero*, 258; Garvin, "Italian Coffee Triangle," especially "Italian Coffee Imports: Not Ethiopia, but Brazil."

[38] Enrico Maltoni and Mauro Carli, *Coffee Makers: Macchine da caffè, 1870–1940* (Sesto Fiorentino: Aska, 2009), 24–37; Morris, *Coffee*, 78–85.

[39] Illycaffè, "From Bean to Cup," company brochure (Trieste, n.d.); Morris, *Coffee*, 130–38; Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds*, 286–90.

[40] Tondo, "Italy Seeks Unesco Heritage Status for Espresso"; Ministero delle Politiche Agricole Alimentari e Forestali, "La candidatura del caffè espresso italiano a patrimonio immateriale dell'Unesco," press dossier, 2021.

[41] Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds*, 26–27.

and Italian café terminology.[42] Style, authorship, and craft work together: style turns serving coffee into an art, authorship is stamped via brand names and patents, and craftsmanship is highlighted in the skill of the barista and the careful roasting and blending of beans. Meanwhile, the farming of the beans—done by anonymous farmers in Brazil or Ethiopia—is outside the frame, much as the wheat farmer is in the pasta case.

Actor-network-wise, coffee as an actant connected Italian consumers with colonial and postcolonial producers worldwide long before globalization was a buzzword. Colonial expansions and trade companies made coffee available, shipping firms transported it, and colonial labor grew it. Then in Italy, roasters, machine-makers, café owners, and customers coalesced around it, with the Ethiopian origin of coffee providing an interesting wrinkle, given Italy's attempt to colonize Ethiopia in the 1930s.[43] One might provocatively say Italy couldn't colonize Ethiopia's land for long, but it colonized Ethiopia's gift to the world—coffee—in the cultural realm, making it a centerpiece of Italian identity. Read in a postcolonial key, this dynamic exemplifies how metropolitan Italy has symbolically appropriated a colonial or quasi-colonial commodity, reinscribing it as a benign emblem of national conviviality while the histories of conquest and racialized labor largely remain offstage. In Latour's sense, the coffee bean recruited Italy into a global network, and Italy in turn redefined the coffee network by adding new nodes: the espresso technology and the café social milieu.[44]

Coffee, too, circulates through popular affect as much as through cafés and trade routes. A contemporary example is Sal Da Vinci's 2024 hit "Rossetto e caffè" ("Lipstick and Coffee"), whose very title binds coffee to flirtation, urban intimacy, and everyday sensuality. The point is not that the song explains espresso culture, but that it demonstrates how coffee continues to operate in Italian popular discourse as more than a beverage: it is a social atmosphere, a mood, and a condensed sign of recognizable Italianness. Cultural texts of this kind help sustain the commodity's national familiarity long after its foreign agricultural origins have been bracketed from ordinary perception.

In sum, the espresso case study reinforces that Italian authenticity is performative. It is enacted daily at thousands of bars by millions of Italians, using foreign beans in Italian ways. The conditions enabling this were historical (long-distance trade and urban café culture), philosophical (seeing value in turning a commodity into a social art), and sociological (urbanization, which allowed café culture to flourish as a daily routine). The Made in Italy myth in coffee rides on association with lifestyle and luxury. The Italian style here is efficiency mixed with artistry. The authorship is Italy's—no one calls it "Ottoman coffee" even though that's where Europe learned it; instead the world speaks of "Italian espresso." The craftsmanship is present in barista competition and in every claim that a bar has the best coffee in town—a certain pride in technique as much as in the ingredients. Espresso thus demonstrates how style and ritual can nationalize a foreign substance; by making the consumption of coffee an Italian performance, Italy has made coffee its own. Few people, when sipping an espresso at a café in Rome, think of the highland farmers of Ethiopia or the Brazilian Cerrado—they think of Italian art and lifestyle.

## Fabricated Heritage: Luxury Textiles and the Myth of "Made in Italy" Fashion

Since the postwar period, Italy has become a global reference point for luxury fashion and textiles, from Gucci's velvet and Armani's sharply tailored wool to Versace's patterned silks, even though the couture "Italian" dream is materially assembled from Australian merino,

[42] Istituto Nazionale Espresso Italiano, *Espresso Italiano. Technical Specifications and Sensory Profile* (Milan: INEI, 2010).
[43] Ian Campbell, *The Addis Ababa Massacre. Italy's National Shame* (London: Hurst, 2017), 1–5, 301–5.
[44] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 63–86.

Chinese mulberry silk, and Egyptian cotton. Silk, wool, cotton, and cashmere—the very fibers that Italian artisans transform into fine fabrics and goods—are frequently sourced abroad. In 2022, Italy was the eighth largest importer of raw cotton globally.[45] In effect, Italy has become a world leader in finishing and fashioning materials that originate elsewhere.

Fashion labels supply an especially clear case of cultural mediation because the brand name itself often circulates as a shorthand for aura, status, and style. Recent work on music lyrics shows that luxury fashion is one of the most prominent branded fields in popular song, with Prada and Gucci among the most frequently cited houses, while tracks such as Migos's "Versace" transform the Italian label into a sonic hook in its own right. Here the commodity does not merely travel through markets; the name travels through media, repetition, and desire. Popular music thus becomes one more actant in the diffusion of Italian fashion value, extending the aura of Made in Italy far beyond the workshop and showroom.

The answer lies in authorship and craftsmanship. Italian firms and artisans are the ones who design the patterns, choose the blends, manage the looms, cut and sew the fabrics, and ensure a certain level of quality. Italy has successfully promoted the idea that its craftsmen impart an incomparable value—a blend of technical skill and artistic sensibility—to the materials they work on. Suzy Menkes distilled it to a sentence: "The depth and drama of fabrics remains vital to Italian fashion."[46] The spell of "Made in Italy" is cast not at the point of origin but in the finishing rooms of Prato and Biella, where foreign bales are transformed through specialized techniques of finishing and design into high-end textiles, underscoring that, in this context, authenticity is tied to process rather than to the geographic origin of fiber.

One illustrative example is Como's silk industry. Como has been famed for silk weaving for centuries. By the late twentieth century, Italian sericulture had virtually disappeared. Yet Como's mills did not vanish; instead, they pivoted to importing silk thread from abroad and focusing on high-end weaving, printing, and finishing. Today, Como produces high-fashion silk textiles for brands like Hermès, Gucci, and others, even though the silk fiber itself is imported. As one trade source notes, Como's silk jacquards and prints are renowned, and the region's fabric ecosystem thrives on its specialization and quality control, while raw silk is sourced globally.[47] This reflects a broader pattern: Italy adds value at the stage of craftsmanship—whether it be weaving luxurious textiles or crafting leather goods—and hence, notably, while it even imports most of its un-tanned leather hides, Italy is the world's top exporter of high-quality tanned leather products.[48]

In terms of style and authorship, Italian fashion heavily emphasizes the role of the designer (the *stilista*, the stylist or the creative director) and the heritage of the brand. Gucci's identity is tied to Italian glamour and artisanship, yet the brand's raw-materials list reads like a geography lesson: Egyptian cotton for shirts, Scottish cashmere or Mongolian goat cashmere for knitwear, Australian merino wool for suits, Indonesian python or African crocodile leather for bags, Chinese silk for scarves, etc. Gucci's success lies in turning these into coherent products that scream Italian style—through design motifs, quality manufacturing in Italian workshops, and the mystique around the Made in Italy label. Legally, a product can bear that label if the "last substantial transformation" occurred in Italy. Italian law and EU regulations codify a notion of authenticity based on place of craftsmanship rather than place of origin of

[45] Anna Maria Rinaldi, "Cashmere, Cotton and the Myth of 'Made in Italy,'" *Vogue Business*, March 15, 2022, accessed November 29, 2025; UN Comtrade, *International Trade Statistics Yearbook 2022*, vol. 2 (New York: United Nations, 2023).

[46] Suzy Menkes, "#SuzyMFW: Folksy Sportswear at Etro and Marco de Vincenzo's New Baroque," *British Vogue*, February 26, 2017, https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/suzy-mfw-etro-marco-de-vincenzo.

[47] "The Silk District of Como," Italian Trade Agency, accessed 29 November 2025.

[48] "Italy – Leather and Hides Sector," in Mahmoud Qattous and Terry McCallin, *Leather and Shoes Sector Study* (ITC/UNIDO report, 2009); International Trade Centre and UNIDO, *Leather and Shoes Sector Study: Italy* (Geneva: ITC/UNIDO, 2009), 7–10.

materials. This legal framework itself stems from Italy's postwar effort to protect and brand its manufacturing prowess. The factors that went into creating the Made in Italy myth here include government and industry initiatives in the 1950s–70s that highlighted creativity, flexibility, and design excellence as Italian hallmarks.[49] During those "Italian economic miracle" years, family firms and workshops flourished by marrying artisanal know-how with modern production, producing the myth of Made in Italy as simultaneously artful and industrial.[50] The narrative almost always foregrounds the Italian creator—e.g. "Designed by Giorgio Armani, made by Italian hands"—and rarely mentions that, say, the cashmere came from Inner Mongolia.

However, recent investigations have started to pull back the curtain on some less savory aspects of these supply chains, which ironically reinforce how essential foreign inputs and labor have been. Reports by Italian authorities have revealed that some luxury "Made in Italy" garments were secretly produced in part by undocumented Chinese immigrant workers in Italy, who were paid very low wages.[51] For instance, a 2023–24 probe found that a supplier for Loro Piana subcontracted work to clandestine workshops on the outskirts of Milan staffed by Chinese workers paid €4 an hour.[52] Armani and Dior were also found to have some handbags made by subcontractors paying a pittance, before those products were sold for thousands of euros.[53] These scandals challenge the simplistic equation of Made in Italy with impeccable craft, showing that the global network extends even into Italian territory via migrant labor and outsourcing. But importantly, the reaction has been one of doubling down on the myth: authorities intervened to ensure that these brands correct course and uphold the image of ethical, high-quality Italian manufacturing.[54] Public debate treats the issue as a last-ditch defense of Made in Italy's soul, warning that any dilution is a betrayal of an otherwise immaculate craft tradition.

In actor-network terms, consider a luxury suit: the Australian sheep farmer, the Chinese spinner, the Italian weaver, the Neapolitan tailor, and the global consumer are all part of the network that produces the suit's value.[55] But the suit is labeled in a way that highlights only one node—Italy—as the source of authenticity. ANT would encourage us to "follow the fabric" from sheep to shop, revealing all the actants; however, the myth relies on a kind of strategic blindness to many of those actants, focusing attention on the Italian artisan at the final stages.

The sociocultural construction of Made in Italy thus rests heavily on curating perception. It is, as scholars have noted, realistic imagery re-proposed to the foreign consumer that takes elements of history (Renaissance art, artisan guild traditions) and modern excellence (design schools, innovation) and melds them into a compelling story.[56] That story has genuine foundations; Italy does have Renaissance art, and it does have skilled artisans, but it is selectively told to gloss over the global interdependence. In a sense, Italy performs a kind of "heritage alchemy," turning imported raw materials into cultural gold by means of style and craft. This is one of the main factors in the Made in Italy myth's creation and success: the

[49] "Rethinking 'Made in Italy.'"
[50] "Rethinking 'Made in Italy.'"
[51] "Italy's 'Made in Italy' Luxury Brands Used 'Sweatshop' Labour, Prosecutors Say," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2024; and Crispian Balmer, "Loro Piana Supplier Used Illegal Workshops Paying €4 an Hour, Italian Police Say," *Reuters*, April 19, 2024.
[52] "Italy's 'Made in Italy' Luxury Brands Used 'Sweatshop' Labour, Prosecutors Say."
[53] Crispian Balmer, "Italy Puts Loro Piana Under Judicial Administration over Labour Exploitation," Reuters, July 14, 2025; Imogen West-Knights, "'Made in Italy': Is the Label Just Another Luxury Fashion Illusion?," *The Guardian*, July 24, 2025; "Italy Cracks Down on Sweatshops Supplying Armani and Dior," Bloomberg, July 16, 2025.
[54] "Italy's 'Made in Italy' Luxury Brands Used 'Sweatshop' Labour, Prosecutors Say"; Balmer, "Loro Piana Supplier Used Illegal Workshops Paying €4 an Hour."
[55] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.
[56] Simona Segre Reinach, "Italian Fashion. Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," in *The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives*, ed. Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil (London: Routledge, 2010).

careful highlighting of some truths (Italian design genius, beautiful craftsmanship) while backgrounding others (foreign inputs, transnational labor). Made in Italy resonates as a synonym for taste and quality because, over decades, Italy delivered many products that embodied those traits, and at the same time, a story was continuously told that framed these products as part of a cohesive national tradition of style.

**Reverse-Authenticity and the Making of Italianità: Discussion**

Through the four case studies—tomatoes, wheat/pasta, coffee, and fashion textiles—a clear pattern emerges. Italy's cultural icons often have biographical threads that lead far beyond Italy's borders, yet they are woven into an Italian narrative so thoroughly that their foreign origins become a footnote or even a forgotten prelude. As scholars of Italian national identity have long argued, italianità itself emerged through uneven processes of regional integration, migration, and myth-making rather than from a fixed cultural core, making it a particularly apt case for thinking about hybrid national brands.[57] Taken together, these trajectories place Italy within a dense web of planetary inputs, in which commodities arriving from multiple continents are successively processed, narrated, and naturalized as Italian.

**1. Conditions for an Italian form of aesthetic creativity and taste**

Historically, Italy's aesthetic culture has been shaped by openness, hybridity, and what we might call transformative adaptation. Italy's geography as a peninsula at the center of the Mediterranean and its history of Roman trade networks and Renaissance cosmopolitanism ensured exposure to diverse influences. From antiquity, the Italian peninsula received new foods, spices, fabrics, and artistic ideas via trade and conquest. The philosophical condition underpinning Italian creativity might be described as a celebration of *il bello e ben fatto* (the beautiful and well-made) regardless of origin. Italian taste tends to emphasize harmony, balance, and pleasure; when new materials or ideas arrive, they are evaluated by how they can serve those aesthetic and gustatory ideals rather than rejected for being alien.

We saw this with the tomato: once its culinary potential was recognized, it was embraced in the service of making food more flavorful and beautiful. In fashion, when Italian designers found the best cashmere in Mongolia or the best silk in China, they incorporated it to make luxurious products.[58] This points to a sociological condition: Italian identity was often constructed through synthesis. Even the formation of modern Italy in the nineteenth century was an exercise in melding different regional identities into one national culture, a process facilitated by shared customs like food. The North and South of Italy had distinct foodways, but pasta and tomato became a bridge, a common national dish by the mid-twentieth century. Thus, an Italian form of aesthetic creativity can flourish under conditions of exchange and diversity, provided there is a unifying frame—language, shared institutions, pride in craftsmanship—that can absorb the external into a new internal consistency.

The cases also suggest a confidence in craft as an Italian trait. Italians historically had strong artisan guilds and a belief that skilled workmanship can elevate any material. This

[57] See David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880–1980: Cultural Industries, Politics and the Public* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); and Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943–1988* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

[58] United Nations Statistics Division, "UN Comtrade Database: Italy's Imports of Cotton, Not Carded or Combed (HS 5201), 2018–2023," accessed October 15, 2026, https://comtradeplus.un.org/; United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Trends in Natural and Man-Made Fibres Trade (Geneva: United Nations, 2025), 18–21, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditccom2025d2_en.pdf.

confidence helps explain why importing raw materials is not seen as undermining authenticity; what matters is the final crafting. The condition here is valuing craftsmanship as the locus of authenticity. As long as Italians are the ones shaping it, it becomes Italian art. Sociologically, one can point to Italy's relatively late unification and the need to forge national symbols thereafter: the new nation required common denominators such as foods, fashion, and design to unite its people and project soft power abroad. These were deliberately cultivated. Pellegrino Artusi's famous 1891 cookbook *Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well* collected recipes from all over Italy, including tomato-sauce pasta from Naples, to help define a national cuisine.[59] Such efforts indicate that Italian taste is curated and, in a sense, created in moments of social change, not something immemorial.

## 2. Main factors in the creation and success of the "Made in Italy" myth

Several key factors emerge. First, high-quality production. The myth has credibility because Italian industries achieved and still achieve high standards in many sectors, from the consistent *al dente* quality of pasta to the fine tailoring of suits. This quality comes from skilled labor, intelligent integration of modern technology with tradition, and state or institutional support for quality marks such as DOC, DOP, and IGP for foods, certifications for espresso, and fashion councils for textiles and clothing.[60]

Second, heritage narrative and continuity. Postwar Italy marketed its goods by "constructing a realistic imagery" that evoked "the myth of Renaissance excellence, synonymous with prestige and artistic craftsmanship," thereby lending historical gravitas to contemporary exports.[61] This myth of continuity made buying a Fiat or a Ferragamo shoe feel like tapping into centuries of Italian artisanal lineage, even when the item was factory-made in an industrial suburb.

Third, branding and media representation. Made in Italy was consciously promoted as a brand from the 1950s onward. Fashion shows, Hollywood films, and the global proliferation of Italian restaurants all served as advertising for an Italian lifestyle. By the 1980s, Made in Italy in fashion was a globally recognized mark of desirability. Surveys indicate that the label still has strong positive country-of-origin effects; one international ranking has consistently placed Made in Italy among the world's most valued "nation brands" in consumer perception.[62] This success fed back into Italian pride and into further campaigns by the Italian Trade Agency and government efforts against misleading "Italian sounding" labels abroad.[63]

Fourth, flexibility and innovation. The era that solidified Made in Italy was marked by a mood of creativity, flexibility, and passion among Italian entrepreneurs.[64] They were usually small or medium-sized family businesses that could move quickly, innovate in design, and carve out a niche in quality. This entrepreneurship, paired with regional specialization, resulted in an agile economy capable of maintaining a focus on excellence.[65] Yet this image of flexibility needs to be read historically, not simply celebrated as an Italian cultural trait. The small family firm and the regional industrial district became central to the mythology of Made

[59] Pellegrino Artusi, *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiar bene* (Florence: Landi, 1891).
[60] Parasecoli, *Al Dente*.
[61] "Rethinking 'Made in Italy.'"
[62] "The Most Powerful Country Brands 2023," *Brand Finance Nation Brands 2023* report, accessed November 29, 2025.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Maurizio di Robilant, "Made in Italy. A Brand Born from Creativity and Flexibility," *Superstudio Magazine*, 2019.
[65] Becattini, "The Marshallian Industrial District"; Arnaldo Bagnasco, *Tre Italie*.

in Italy during the post-Fordist transition,[66] when flexibility, subcontracting, niche production, and rapid adaptation were increasingly valued over the standardized mass production associated with older Fordist industries.[67] In this sense, Italy came to represent a distinctive model of entrepreneurial capitalism: locally rooted, family-owned, design-oriented, and apparently more intimate than the anonymous corporation.[68]

Fifth, emotional value and lifestyle also played a central role. Made in Italy grew into more than a mark of origin; it came to signify a lifestyle that consumers found alluring, a mix of elegance, joy of living, and authenticity. It promises not just a product but a piece of "the sweet life," *la dolce vita*, a purchasable intimacy with Italian style, pleasure, and place. That emotional appeal has been a major factor in its success, encouraging consumers to pay premium prices for the Italian cachet.[69] At the same time, this emotional appeal was intensified by the neoliberal and transnational turn of the postindustrial economy. As production became more globally dispersed, Made in Italy increasingly evoked a world that appeared to be disappearing: the workshop, the family business, the artisan-entrepreneur, the regional district, and the owner whose name still seemed attached to the product.[70] The label therefore came to signify not only elegance or pleasure but also a nostalgic form of capitalism imagined as more human, creative, and place-based than the global supply chains that actually sustain it.[71] This is one reason why Italy could become the marker of a bygone era of "entrepreneurial capitalism":[72] the brand sold the aura of localized craft and family enterprise from within a postindustrial economy increasingly structured by outsourcing, subcontracting, migrant labor, and transnational sourcing.[73]

The paradox explored in the case studies—foreign materials behind the scenes—generally did not diminish this appeal because the myth focuses on the end experience, the delicious taste, the beautiful look, the feeling of luxury, which is real to the consumer irrespective of material origins. In this sense, Made in Italy operates as what Appadurai would call a powerful "ideoscape," a circulating image of Italian excellence that organizes how commodities and practices are perceived globally.[74]

## 3. Style, fashion, authorship, and craftsmanship in constructing "Made in Italy"

Style, fashion, authorship, and artistry have been the primary means of conveying the Made in Italy mythology. Style, in the Italian sense, is a unique sense of design aesthetic. It exists in clothing, cars and furniture, and also when plating a dish. It is powerfully illustrated by simplicity with attitude, even innovativeness, with tradition and beauty in our daily life. Italian products are presented in a way that makes them recognizable and appealing; the profile of a

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[66] Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Giacomo Becattini, "The Marshallian Industrial District as a Socio-Economic Notion," in *Industrial Districts and Inter-Firm Co-operation in Italy*, ed. Frank Pyke, Giacomo Becattini, and Werner Sengenberger (Geneva: International Institute for Labour Studies, 1990), 37–51.

[67] Piore and Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide*; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

[68] Arnaldo Bagnasco, *Tre Italie: La problematica territoriale dello sviluppo italiano* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1977).

[69] "The Most Powerful Country Brands 2023," *Brand Finance Nation Brands 2023* report, accessed November 29, 2025.

[70] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*; Simone Ghezzi, "Familism in the Firm: An Ethnographic Approach to Italian Family Capitalism," *Ethnologie française* 46, no. 2 (2016): 241–54, https://doi.org/10.3917/ethn.162.0241.

[71] Lisa Rofel and Sylvia J. Yanagisako, *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism: A Collaborative Ethnography of Italian-Chinese Global Fashion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

[72] Piore and Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide*; Ghezzi, "Familism in the Firm."

[73] Rofel and Yanagisako, *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism*; Ghezzi, "Familism in the Firm."

[74] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

Fiat sports car or the lines of an Olivetti typewriter were just as critical in selling the idea of Italian modernity as telling us what they did.[75] Style is a cultural signature that sets Italian merchandise apart from the generic, thereby reaffirming local specificity as an essentially Italian quality. Italians do not consider fashion and design mere industries, for they are also contributors to national pride and the projection of national identity. Milan Fashion Week, the stories of such legendary designers as geniuses, and the perception of Italian cities as bastions of style reinforced Italy's status as a trendsetter and an artisan par excellence.[76]

Authorship is the deliberate tethering of an object to its maker—whether a named artisan, atelier, or logo—turning the product into a signature that speaks for its origin. Many brands carry the names of their founders, and even in cuisine there is a notion of authorship in the named chef or the *nonna's* (grandmother's) recipe. This personalization means that consuming the product is akin to appreciating the work of an Italian auteur. It humanizes the product and links it to Italian people and stories. Authorship is part of why we say "this is an Armani suit" with reverence; it invokes an Italian author who embodies specific values of taste. Bhabha's reflections on cultural authority and the "location of culture" are useful here: the Italian author-function stabilizes hybridity by giving it a recognizable voice.[77]

Craftsmanship is probably the most frequently cited value in Made in Italy rhetoric. The figure of the craftsman—the tailor, the cobbler, the gelato maker—plying his careful trade is what affords quality. It connotes time-tested methods that are highly detailed and the fact that a person's hands have been on these clothes, in contrast to mass-produced goods elsewhere. Even when technologies are employed, Italians emphasize the artisanal: hand-finishing, family recipes, and limited production. By placing craftsmanship in the foreground, Italy creates authenticity as something worked for—through effort and skill—rather than something automatically granted by natural matter. That is, Italy can import the materials and still claim to have produced the genuine article, because authenticity is located in the skilled labor of finishing rather than in the origin of the fiber.

In sociocultural terms, the figure of the artisan became a national icon. Tourism ads and documentaries show Italian craftspeople blowing Murano glass, stitching leather, or tossing pizza dough as custodians of heritage. This persona reinforces the Made in Italy myth by providing a face of tradition and quality that consumers can believe in and also fosters internal cultural pride. Italians see themselves as a nation of creators and makers, which sustains the collective investment in maintaining these traditions. Latour reminds us that the artisan is merely the spotlighted node in a sprawling mesh of wool brokers, dye patents, EU safety norms, and Instagram feeds; fold the network into a hang-tag, and the entire cast disappears, leaving only a single name gleaming on the box.[78]

**Reverse-authenticity and Heritage Essentialism**

Bringing these threads together, we arrive at the central paradox of reverse-authenticity. Italy has shown that authenticity can be produced "in reverse," not by insisting on native origin but by integrating foreign elements into a coherent cultural expression. Italian identity, especially as projected through cuisine and fashion, is a performance in which everyone plays a part: global producers supply excellence from their end, Italian makers contribute design and craft, and Italian myth-builders in marketing, media, and institutions narrate it all as an Italian triumph.

[75] Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Design in the USA* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
[76] Eugenia Paulicelli, "Italian Fashion: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2015): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2014.973150.
[77] Bhabha, *Location of Culture*.
[78] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

Rather than authenticity being about a single origin or an untouched tradition, Italian reverse-authenticity is about a blending that feels natural and authentic in its own right. When an Italian nonna in Naples makes ragù, it is authentic Italian grandmaternal cooking even if the tomatoes were originally from Peru centuries back, and the beef might be from French cattle. The context and method make it Italian—not the ultimate origin of every input. Seen this way, authenticity is not purity but the ability to stay recognizable while constantly re-weaving foreign threads; yet invoking "reverse-authenticity" also demands that we ask who profits, who is erased, and whose stories the new weave leaves out. This essay unsettles heritage essentialism because it shows heritage as an evolving narrative rather than a static essence. The success of the Made in Italy narrative cautions us to be vigilant about whose stories are told and whose are hidden. To name this process "reverse-authenticity" is therefore not to endorse it but to identify the mechanism by which cultural legitimacy is produced through both demonstrable craft and systematic erasure.

In a world increasingly aware of supply chains, Italy will likely face more questions about transparency. Already, there are pushes for more local sourcing for sustainability reasons, including experiments to grow cotton in Italy again and to revalorize domestic fibers. At the same time, climate-induced crop failures in Canada or Ethiopia periodically disrupt wheat and coffee supplies, exposing how vulnerable Italian culinary icons are to ecological shocks elsewhere and forcing a reconsideration of what "resilient" Made in Italy might mean. Such moves suggest that the myth can evolve, with values like sustainability becoming part of what Made in Italy means, even as global interdependence continues.

Seen across the four cases, reverse-authenticity follows a recurrent sequence: extra-national materials enter Italian circuits of processing and exchange; institutions, brands, and everyday practices stabilize them within recognizable forms of Italian taste and style; and those foreign inputs are subsequently naturalized as if they were always already part of national heritage.

## Conclusion

The exploration of reverse-authenticity reveals not a benign synthesis but a structured cultural operation in which foreign materials are made to appear as self-evidently Italian at the point of transformation, narration, and consumption. This does not make Made in Italy a simple fraud. It makes it a myth in the stronger critical sense: a form that naturalizes historically contingent relations of trade, labor, empire, and mediation into the appearance of national essence. The power of the label lies precisely in this double movement. It rests on real practices of design, finishing, and craft, yet it also depends on selective visibility, foregrounding Italian skill while backgrounding the extra-Italian material and human networks that sustain it. Reverse-authenticity should therefore be read less as a celebratory model than as an analytic for understanding how modern national brands convert distributed global processes into legible scenes of local authenticity.

This argument does not deny the material excellence of Italian design, finishing, and craft. It instead resituates that excellence within unequal and transnational histories, which the label Made in Italy ordinarily obscures. What Made in Italy offers is not a harmonious reconciliation of globality and locality but a powerful cultural technology for converting dispersed labor, foreign matter, imperial afterlives, and commodity flows into the legible appearance of national coherence. Reverse-authenticity is therefore best understood not as a normative ideal but as a critical analytic for tracking how modern brands transform globally distributed processes into scenes of local intimacy and cultural inevitability. Seen in this light, authenticity names less an origin than a managed effect of transformation, narration, and selective visibility.