

The Carbonara Case: Italian Food and the Race to Conquer Consumers' Memories

Marco Ginanneschi

Finanza Futura Srl

Abstract

Can a recipe divide historians, gastronomes, and chefs? The answer is yes if we are dealing with carbonara, an iconic Italian dish, famous throughout the world. However, so much animosity could have deeper roots than the recently renewed controversy over its authorship suggests. This article aims to study the case of carbonara as an example of the race to conquer consumers' memories. Following a transdisciplinary methodology, the author identifies three main approaches to the making of carbonara: glocal, regional, and creative. These approaches reflect distinct schools of thought regarding food within the diverse spectrum of Italian society. Their supporters - orthodox, revisionist, and innovators - compete to influence and rewrite the past to better suit our deepest needs for safety, protection, enjoyment, and eternity. Their interactions are explained with the help of a model, the "golden recipe triangle," shedding light on the conflict-inducing elements but also accounting for the widespread popularity of the recipe. Moved by the remembrance of a perfect carbonara, we all want to experience it again and again. Ultimately, this perception, continuously stimulated by competing narratives, may underpin the success of this global "megafood" (valued at least 1 billion euros in turnover per year), along with other worldwide renowned dishes such as pizza and tiramisù. In the end, the turbulent dynamics at play in the carbonara case should be viewed as indicative of the vitality of Italy's culinary culture.

Keywords

Megafoods; carbonara; Italian food; golden recipe triangle; transdisciplinarity; social sciences; Made in Italy.

*The universe's wisdom, foolishness, and enjoyment
are all inside a plate of spaghetti carbonara.¹*

Carbonara is one of the most famous Italian dishes in the world. Most commonly served with spaghetti, bucatini, or macaroni, this sauce is made of a few basic ingredients: eggs, pecorino cheese, pork jowl, and pepper. Collectively, these form the "canon" for the traditional recipe. However, the dish's history, the diffusion of

¹ Originally a saying about a cup of tea, modified by the author.

local versions, and its reinterpretation by famous chefs make reality much more intricate than that.

In the spring of 2023, the *Financial Times* published an interview with Alberto Grandi by Marianna Giusti (2023), in which the Italian food historian asserted that carbonara, along with other renowned Italian culinary creations, owes its origin to invention, not tradition. In other words, much of the prevailing narrative about this dish could be a fabrication, a myth, or a legend. Furthermore, Grandi postulated that carbonara, so iconic of Italian dolce vita, probably has US-related historical roots. This claim ignited a firestorm of controversy, especially in Italy where sentiments of patriotism and gastronationalism found their way into the press, society, and politics. The purpose of this article is not to solve the puzzle of the historical origin of carbonara but rather to explain why carbonara-making generates so much controversy. As we shall see, at the core of this enigma lies a deeply hidden race to conquer consumers' memories. The single case study approach (Coombs 2022) looks like the appropriate research strategy for a complex issue like food (Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam 2018), with the advice to use it for exploratory purposes (Priya 2020). This research, mostly qualitative, is based on a transdisciplinary approach including the full spectrum of social sciences: it represents an exercise in critical thinking aimed at opening new study directions.

Case Discussion

The origin of the recipe is lost in the mists of time. The etymology is similarly unclear. Carbonara could come from *carbonari* (lit. “charcoal makers”), the members of a secret revolutionary society active in Italy in the nineteenth century, fighting absolutism and promoting Italian independence from foreign domination. Or, it could come from *carbonai*, charcoal burners in the Abruzzi Region who used to climb the mountains taking along with them cheese and eggs as main ingredients for their pasta sauces. Cesari (2022, 112) and Grandi think that the origin of the carbonara should instead be traced back to World War II and to an American-Italian mix of ingredients: eggs and bacon, which the American Army stationed in Italy had in abundance, alongside Italian pasta. They agree that “carbonara is an American dish born in Italy” (Giusti 2023).

However, even more controversy is generated by the choice of ingredients (the “canon”) required to prepare it. According to Cesari (2022), seventy years of mentions in cookbooks, food journals, and newspapers does not mean seventy years of an unaltered standard recipe existence. During this period, carbonara has been made using additional ingredients such as fresh cream, garlic, onions, saffron, mushrooms, clams, and wine. Even basic ingredients had some variations: whole eggs, or a mix of white and yolk or only yolk; plain pancetta (pork belly), smoked pancetta, or bacon in place of pork jowl; gruyere, pecorino cheese alone, *Parmigiano*

alone or a blend of the two. All these variations left a mark on the local culinary traditions.

What does pecorino cheese in the most popular recipes stand for? Given that in Italy there are 139 kinds of cheese made from sheep milk,² the referral here is to *Pecorino Romano* (Cesari 2022, 67): the number one for sales and export (two-thirds of all Italian pecorino cheese is exported; ISMEA 2019) and – very important – a Protected Denomination of Origin (PDO), the ninth among the 319 Italian Geographical Indications (GIs)³, with a production value of 302 million Euro, a global turnover of 465 million Euro and an estimated export value of 216 million Euro (2021; ISMEA-Qualivita 2022, 24), ca. 70% of which destined to the USA (ISMEA 2019, 4). *Pecorino Romano* producers benefit enormously from the popularity of the carbonara recipe. The correlation between the export performance and the interest in carbonara on the web cannot yet be measured analytically (only a few data are available, see Figure 1), but it can be inferred.

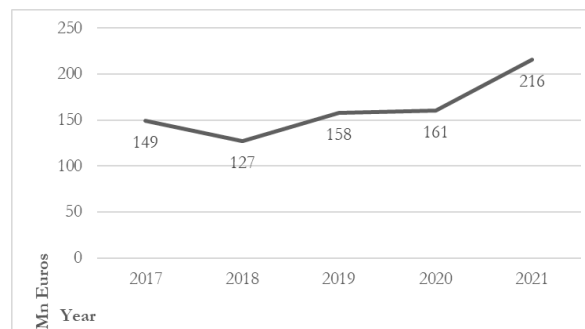


Figure 1: Pecorino Romano PDO's Export (2017-2021, in Mn Euros). Source: www.onaf.it.

Moreover, the export boom that took place during the pandemic (ANSA 2020) corresponds perfectly with the peak in popularity of the term “carbonara” measured by Google Trends in March-May 2020 in the US (see Figure 2).

² Source: www.onaf.it.

³ For a quick reference to PDO and other GIs see <https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/farming/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes/>.

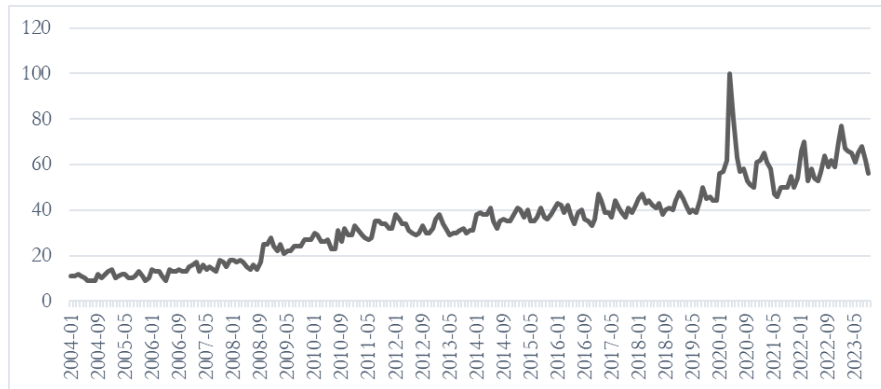


Figure 2: Interest in the word “carbonara” (USA, 2004-2023 – Trend and peak). Source: Google Trends, consulted on September 26, 2023. Historical series, 2004-01 / 2023-09.

In fact, during the pandemic, when many US states were implementing stay-at-home orders, a significant shift occurred in food-related behaviors. Social distancing measures encouraged people to engage in food preparation at home and online purchases, as observed by Ginanneschi (2020a) and Chenarides et al. (2020). Simultaneously, individuals turned to “comfort food” (Mejova and Manikonda 2023, 610; Stano 2021, 118), that is to foods providing consolation or a sense of well-being (Spence 2017, 105).⁴ Comfort food is often associated with nostalgia (Sarmiento et al. 2011), childhood memories, and home-cooked meals (Stano 2021, 119). It may even evoke memories of what our parents or grandparents prepared for us when we were unwell as children, as noted by Spence (2017, 107). Moreover, it has been shown that “after periods of societal uncertainty and national crises, the sales of comfort foods, such as soup, mashed potatoes, and macaroni and cheese, increase” (Sarmiento et al. 2011, 7).

Carbonara responded to all these human needs. Given these premises, the link between the rising popularity of carbonara and the success of *Pecorino Romano* cheese looks much more concrete. Similar considerations apply also to *Parmigiano* – an optional ingredient – with a few differences. First, *Parmigiano* in Italy and the EU (Hauer 2008) stands only for *Parmigiano Reggiano* PDO while pecorino is a generic type of cheese: “*romano* (+ PDO)” needs to be added to identify the latter properly. In the US, instead, parmesan is a generic cheese name. According to the American dictionary Merriam-Webster, it means “a very hard dry sharply flavored cheese that is sold grated or in wedges.”⁵ There are several American producers of parmesan in the USA, and the Italian *Parmigiano Reggiano* PDO never stops lamenting unfair competition and counterfeiting through Italian-sounding labels by

⁴ Studies confirmed even a “significant increase in the energy density of solid foods intake overall” (Poskute, Nzesi, and Geliebter 2021, 3).

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Parmesan>.

their colleagues from the other side of the ocean⁶. In the EU, calling *Parmigiano Reggiano* or *Pecorino Romano* a descriptive ingredient in a food name requires the use of the PDO product only.⁷ A recent study (Qualivita 2021, 48) on the importance of the use of products as an ingredient in processed foods confirms that the most concerned category is precisely “first courses” (pasta dishes). The economic significance of the question “Which cheese to use in the carbonara recipe?” is very clear.

Pecorino Romano and *Parmigiano Reggiano* PDO⁸ are two economic giants in the rich but fragmented Italian gastronomic landscape. Producers invest relevant resources, helped by public funding, to promote their typical products, underlining the aspects of tradition in every step of production, distribution, and consumption and their effort to preserve it. They are expressions of the traditional forces at play in the public arena. These strong but legitimate economic interests are behind what can be called the *glocal* approach (produced locally, sold globally) to carbonara-making: the message spread through their communication channels is that wherever you are, whatever your nationality, you can still prepare an Italian-style carbonara using “certified” local ingredients coming straight from Italy.⁹

The *glocal* approach to carbonara makes the foreign eater a bit Italian, too: the visual, olfactive, and mouth-watering seduction exerted by a creamy carbonara “makes you what you eat,” since food is always part of “a context of care” (Turollo et al. 2021, 775), especially if you use Italian ingredients, including pasta. A 2021 web advertisement by Barilla, clarifies the power of this transformation. It’s called “CareBonara – The Origins of the Carbonara”¹⁰ and it was broadcast on the occasion of the Carbonara Day 2021. We are brought back to 1944 Rome, and the short movie reconstructs the exact moment of its creation: an American soldier hires an Italian chef (the actor Claudio Santamaria) to organize a restorative meal for the troops. At one point, he clearly says “But this is what this whole thing’s about. Feelin’ the warmth of a home-cooked meal for once.” Eggs and bacon meet sheep cheese from the Roman black market (*mercato carbonaro* in Italian in the movie) and, thanks to spaghetti Barilla, the miracle is done. The “legend” becomes a memory (for those who were there at the time), then history (for us, who learn about it). Adherence to Cesari and Grandi’s preferred explanation is only partial but, in the end, the purpose of the advertisement is not to give a history lesson: the video wants to create a “carbonara sense of community,” built upon the values of family, warmth, and

⁶ See <https://www.parmigianoreggiano.com/it/news/italian-sounding-dairy-summit-parmigiano-reggiano-bertinelli/>.

⁷ See ECJ, Champagner Sorbet Case, C-393/16, December 30, 2017.

⁸ The most relevant PDO in Italy with a production value of 1.28 bn Euro (2021).

⁹ See: <https://parmigianoreggiano.us/recipes/parmigiano-reggiano-carbonara/> (October 21, 2023)

¹⁰ Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyuGzWUXiGQ> (October 21, 2023).

conviviality. It is in the mold of other famous Barilla campaigns like the one launched in the '80s under the slogan "Where's Barilla, there's home." And from the marketing point of view, it seems to have been quite successful:¹¹ a place in the (carbonara's) sun has been conquered and, commercially, it is worth "like gold."

A third ingredient after cheese and pasta - pork jowl - offers us the opportunity to gain an insight into an entirely new world of valuable food ingredients and at the same time to discuss a second approach to carbonara-making: the *regional* approach. As mentioned earlier, certain variations of carbonara incorporate flat pancetta (pork belly), smoked pancetta, or bacon. Here, we will consider in-depth only the "canonical" ingredient, pork jowl. As many as eight Italian Regions (Abruzzo, Calabria, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Molise, Sardegna, Tuscany, Umbria, and Puglia) give special recognition to their locally-made pork jowl. These charcuteries are similar as a concept/cut but different regarding pork race, type of breeding, salting, peppering, and seasoning.¹² At least 25 years of production must have been practiced in a given area to get the qualification of PAT (*Prodotto Agroalimentare Tradizionale*, Traditional Food Product). PATs have legal recognition only in Italy and a much-reduced protection compared to EU-regulated GIs. Established by law in 1998, the national database counts over 5,000 recognized food specialties, one-third raw fruits and vegetables, and two-thirds processed food or recipes (Ginanneschi 2022a). Their number grows every year. The consumer does not get a quality guarantee but only "cultural" information about its origin, making, and ingredients. For example, if the consumer for his carbonara chooses to chop Amatrice pork jowl lard (a PAT), he might know, consulting the regional Atlas of Traditional Products (Regione Abruzzo 2006, 37) that this PAT:

has always been an integral part of the diet of the Laga Mountains shepherds who had to spend several months on the slopes, so needed foodstuffs that would be easy to preserve and with a high calorie content. In the 1700s, when the entire area was part of the Kingdom of Naples, the "guanciale" became a prime ingredient for the famous "pasta all'Amatriciana," together with lovely Amatriciano Pecorino cheese.

We can already imagine how our carbonara list of ingredients will look like after a full immersion into a specific Region's gastronomic paradise: an Asiago seasoned PDO in the *carbonara alla veneta*; *sartizza* PAT (dried sausage) together with *buttariga de tonnu* PAT (tuna botargo) in the *carbonara alla sarda*; *Pecorino Toscano* PDO (a type of sheep cheese) and *gota* PAT (the local pork jowl) in the *carbonara alla toscana*; asparagus, garlic, milk cream and *toma* cheese (several types of PATs) in the very unconventional *carbonara monferrina*. Confronted with the high number

¹¹ The English version totaled 4.8 million visualizations.

¹² According to Grandi (2018, 134), the reason for such differences goes back to the monopoly exerted by pork butchers, itinerant professionals who visited local farms in a given rural area until the '50s.

of PATs for every single ingredient, Grandi (2018, 133) at one point simply exclaimed that “it is evident that the sense of measure has been lost.”

However, pressure to obtain European recognition for the PATs or at least a “go-ahead” with more organized promotion aimed at the local consumer has been mounting in recent years. In terms of policy, this push aims to facilitate broader consumer choices, conserve biodiversity, promote sustainable agriculture, and foster a more regionally oriented food industry (Ginanneschi, 2022b). Notably, numerous traditional foods, predominantly vegetable species but also recipes, face the threat of extinction or disappearance due to the effects of globalization, not only in Italy but also worldwide (Saladino, 2022). In response to this concerning trend, many small-scale producers look for visibility in the market and seek to establish direct relationships with consumers. They leverage the local factor, capitalizing on trust and a connection to local consumption habits. While national and international distribution channels are already under the influence of larger corporations and PDO-PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) organizations, carbonara – the epitome of a constantly expanding food economy – still offers opportunities to the small PAT producers.

A third approach to carbonara preparation – the *creative* one – is less dependent on the origin and pedigree of ingredients and more linked to technique, following the example offered by French nouvelle cuisine (Moriani 2021, XI). Chefs tend to stress the superiority of creativity in the process of recipe invention, raw material selection, cooking style, and food presentation. Sometimes, however, they do not know the special body of legislation behind GIs, PATs, and other food designations. Very often Italian restaurant menus lack both origin indications for their ingredients and GI quality guarantees.¹³ By norm, GI ingredients are highlighted and promoted – becoming a part of the restaurant’s business model – only when the GI’s brand is strong enough to capture customers’ attention (like Mozzarella di Bufala Campana DOP). This is the case with the new phenomenon of gourmet pizzerias or McDonald’s choice of Italian PDO ingredients for its burger offer in Italy.

Starred and famous chefs in Italy show the way to their colleagues. The highest ambition, amplified as it can be by social media and TV, is to create the perfect carbonara, the unforgettable one, the one to imitate, the one to study or to talk about. There are no rules in this game. Carbonara-making at this level (“My carbonara” or “Carbonara my way”) offers important examples of creativity and therefore of variations: from the use of technical expedients to recreate the quintessence of tradition adopted by Luciano Monosilio, to the revolution carried out by Valerio Braschi with the invention of the liquid carbonara (distilled and

¹³ It is also for this reason that, in 2020, the Italian Ministry for Agriculture instituted a special Fund (“Fondo Ristorazione”) to promote Ho.re.ca companies’ purchase of 100% Made in Italy Food.

water-consistent); from the re-construction made by Barbara Agosti with the carbonara in the shape of an ice lolly to the radical revision with local ingredients from Piedmont proposed by Marco Sacco with his “Carbonara au Koque.”¹⁴ The level of sophistication in the choice of ingredients goes so far as to select a pork jowl seasoned with a special blend of three peppers: Indonesia, smoked Vietnam, and Sarawak from Malaysia.¹⁵

The economic importance of the *creative* approach in the eating “away from home” market (82 billion euros turnover compared to 260 billion for total food consumption in Italy, 2022¹⁶) must not be underestimated. Thanks to TV and new media the old and the new generation of chefs are shaping a new culinary identity (Soncini 2015), distinguishing themselves amid an overabundance of discourses and images about food, which has been defined as gastrationalism (Fino and Cecconi 2021, 14) or even food porn (Benasso and Stagi 2019, 237). Both in the physical space and in the digital one, however, the search for the perfect carbonara moves creators and consumers, generating an eternal return.

The use of “food as a distinctive source of ethnic pride” (Costantini 2018, 41) spreads beyond borders and contributes to the defense of a national identity abroad, especially in the USA, where generations of immigrants are now connected through the web in innumerable new ways. Italian-American cuisine has generated hundreds of cookbooks, blogs, websites, and homemade videos. From the top of this pyramid of narratives, a few chefs create fads, which then evolve into fashions, and ultimately become trends with significant economic impacts.

A Transdisciplinary Interpretation

Zooming into a relatively simple recipe has disclosed a world of socio-economic nuances and cultural layers. The three approaches to carbonara-making shine like different *Weltanschauungen* in the complex universe of Italian food. Behind each approach, economic interests are trying to enlarge their sphere of influence. They are rooted in the large and complex Italian agri-food system but project into the world. Exemplifying, we could call their respective supporters orthodox, revisionist, and innovators. A model, “the golden recipe triangle” (see Figure 3), inspired by Levi-Strauss’ culinary triangle (1965, 20), can help visualize the forces at play in the food social space (Poulain 2017, 228-235). These forces compete with each other to conquer consumers’ hearts (Diamantopoulos et al. 2020). However, the outcome relies significantly on the conquest of their memories.

¹⁴ For a collection of famous carbonara interpretations see Cozzella (2019).

¹⁵ <https://lacucinaitaliana.it/storie/chef-cuochi/carbonara-di-roscioli-ricetta/>.

¹⁶ FIPE, 2023.

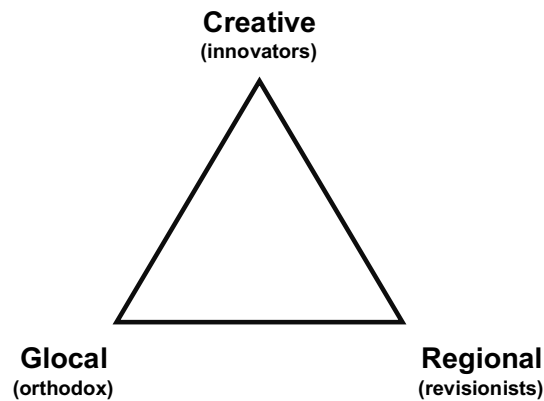


Figure 3: “The golden recipe triangle”

Considering the key drivers behind consumer choices can help understand this point. From the studies on consumer behavior, we know that consumer choices are “multifaceted, situational, dynamic, and complex,” that “family and the home food environment are important influences on dietary intake,” and that “this influence is more profound for children and adolescents” (Chen and Antonelli 2020, 3-8). We also know that consumers might opt for traditional foods (Rocillo-Aquino et al. 2021), defined by Guerrero et al. (2009, 348) as:

a product frequently consumed or associated with specific celebrations and seasons, normally transmitted from one generation to another, made accurately in a specific way according to the gastronomic heritage, with little or no processing/manipulation, distinguished and known because of its sensory properties and associated with a certain local area, region, or country.

Family is so important in the consumption of traditional foods that the first and most shared sub-element of the above definition, detected among the consumers of six European countries by Vanhonacker et al. (2010, 460), refers to the fact that “our grandparents already ate” them. Other elements used to define the concept of traditional foods are “in grandmother’s way,” “it contains a story” and it owns “distinctive sensorial features.” However, it is also indisputable that, in recent times, memory transmission from generation to generation has changed: today “personal consumption of stories, images, and information provided continuously and in great abundance by the mass media has taken over” (Prosperi 2021, 16).

Neurological research on the links between food and memory and between memories and food choices confirms that desires play an active role in bringing back food memories and that memory encoding is influenced by high-caloric food (Thieleking et al. 2023, 33), while “memory is omnipresent in our expectations and the situational meaning that we unconsciously give to products” (Dijksterhuis et al. 2006, 651). Psychological research (Higgs 2011) also confirms the role of memories of past enjoyment in food choice decisions.

Anthropology enlarges the definition of food memories to include “reassembled fragments of past narratives that tie individuals to their respective ancestral histories, sociocultural identities, ethnicities, ways of life, tastes, and preferences” (Lee 2023, 2). Lee (2023) has appropriately re-read Proust’s Madeleine Effect to explain the processes of 1) reawakening of forgotten and involuntary memories; 2) modeling their narrative structures; and 3) commodifying one’s foodways and heritage.¹⁷ A characteristic that our three approaches to carbonara-making have in common is that they all try to appeal to, influence, and, at least partially, re-write consumers’ memories. They use competing narratives, simple stories from the past but also the message attached to viral images of influential chefs at work (Parasecoli 2019), to get in touch with our deepest needs for safety, protection, enjoyment, and eternity. The desired effect is always the same: let the consumer experience again and again the taste of Proust’s Madeleine.

So, what is carbonara in the end: a traditional food, a comfort food, a national recipe, or a playground open to creativity? It all depends on the socially dominant narrative at a given time or place or on the observer’s favorite narrative. From the height of its seventy years of age, carbonara has adapted to several epochs and innumerable users, changed with food habits and fashion, finally establishing itself as a quintessence of Italian food: capable of reassuring, making people feel comfortable, and restoring a sense of family and brotherhood. Each food master, ingredient producer, and single eater has had a role in constructing a web of narratives that can be as adventure-rich as the epic of Gilgamesh. This is not a question of authenticity, canonical purity, or certified pedigree: carbonara can be at the same time an expression of full, declared, exported, or perceived food made in Italy (Ginanneschi 2020b). Its contribution to the construction of the myth of Italian cuisine is probably substantial, even though its global economic value can be here only roughly estimated. If we consider that globally, Italian-sounding food¹⁸ outweighs authentic Made in Italy products threefold, then the carbonara recipe alone could easily hold a value of 1 billion euros per year, merely accounting for the turnover of its ingredients.

Viewed through a transdisciplinary lens, the controversy over its “true” origin loses much of its relevance. The same consideration applies to the other question raised by Grandi (2018, 15), who questions whether “Italian cuisine should be regarded as an economic and cultural construct that emerged following World War II.” Both carbonara and Italian cuisine are the product of invention, in the sense defined by Hobsbawm (1983, 1). This affirmation should not generate scandal: it also applies to other institutions or established traditions invented by mankind such as Money or Government (Harari 2014). Research in the field of narrative has advanced

¹⁷ Heritage: “a contemporary and selective use of a past” (Lee 2023, 18).

¹⁸ “Products whose name, image, shape, and place of production are associated with “typically Italian” features” (Bonaiuto et al. 2021, 2).

to the point of establishing that stories form the foundation for comprehending human behavior, philosophy, science, and history. It can even be said that “the past comes into existence only insofar as we tell stories about it” (Brooks 2022, 11). The emblematic case of carbonara explains it all, including why Italian cuisine is so popular.

Conclusions

This article, moving from the controversial history of the carbonara, has reconstructed the socio-economic value of its core ingredients, revealing the profound impact of the recipe’s popularity on their production and export. This exploration unveiled three competing approaches to carbonara preparation, each emblematic of different culinary ideologies (*glocal*, *regional*, and *creative*) and each an expression of strong economic interests.

A model has been proposed to elucidate the interactions among the different cooking methods and their supporters in the food social space. “The golden recipe triangle” model not only sheds light on the conflict-inducing elements of carbonara-making but also accounts for its widespread popularity. It could also explain the global success of other national “megafoods” — extremely popular foods valued at 1 billion euros or more — such as pizza and tiramisù, as well as foreign dishes like hummus.

If the established players within the “canon” defend their model of culinary orthodoxy, latecomers and newcomers (revisionists and innovators) try to conquer a “place in the sun” of the golden recipe. The way to get consumers’ loyalty consists in rewriting their memories. A transdisciplinary analysis shows that economic forces/actors use competing narratives to connect with our deepest needs and influence our food choices (Proust’s Madeleine Effect). In this larger and nuanced context, suggesting that carbonara is a product of invention shouldn’t be deemed heretical. The tumultuous dynamics surrounding this recipe, rather than foretelling the demise of Italian cuisine due to excessive rigidity, actually highlight how creativity and regionalism inject fresh vitality into the nation’s culinary culture.

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