

# Italians Fear American Palates Will Settle for 'Italian Sounding'

## Romano that isn't linked to 'Sardinia's immaculate fields.'

By EMMA BUBOLA

ROME — Italian food producers have long fretted over competition from American brands that are made to look, and sound, as if they are from Italy. Some carry Italian flags and Tuscan landscapes on their labels; others have (sometimes made-up) names that sound Italian.

But since President Trump began his tariff war with Europe, those concerns have become outright alarm. American competitors could gain an unfair advantage in U.S. supermarkets, the Italians say, turning crumbled Gorgonzola cheese made in the Midwest into a new threat.

"They could take over," said Fabio Leonardi, the chief executive of Igor, an Italian Gorgonzola producer in Novara, west of Milan. "Authentic Italian products could be replaced with Italian-sounding products from Wisconsin."

That, according to one American, would be a culinary travesty.

"I will not go back to the green shaker of unrefrigerated dust that America calls Parm, has the balls to call Parm," Stephen Colbert said on "The Late Show" this month. "I am not interested in eating eggplant à la dandruff."

Italy exports nearly \$9 billion worth of foodstuffs to the United States, with Parmigiano-Reggiano, Gorgonzola, Prosecco and olive oil filling American kitchen cabinets and restaurant menus.

But they sometimes sit beside cheaper, and often cleverly packaged, American goods. Some sellers have simply kept the Italian surname of the companies' immigrant founders. Others go much further to try to make an Italian connection, though none explicitly state they are from Italy. Some purveyors adopt traditional names like Romano or Gorgonzola, which are not protected by trademarks in the United States; packs of grated cheese from New Jersey bear the slogan "a taste of Italy."

"The risk of the expansion of

the Italian-sounding is very concrete," Coldiretti, Italy's main farmers' association, said in a statement. Even Italy's president, Sergio Mattarella, warned last month that American protectionism would encourage "counterfeits" and "the so-called Italian sounding."

"Grana Padano can only be made in Italy," the country's prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, said on Wednesday via video to a gathering of Grana Padano producers. She continued: "There are no alternatives. We are determined to protect our products and our designations of origin against counterfeiting, agricultural piracy, and Italian sounding — an odious phenomenon that costs us 120 billion euros in value every year and a great many jobs."

This month, Mr. Trump paused 20 percent tariffs on European products. On Thursday, Mr. Trump met with Ms. Meloni in Washington and said there "100 percent" will be a trade deal with the European Union, but he gave no details or timeline.

But there is enough uncertainty that some cheese makers have seen American importers reduce orders, according to Assolatte, the Italian dairy producers' association. The recently imposed 10 percent tariff looks good only compared with the steeper fees that could return if negotiations fail.

In 2020, after Mr. Trump imposed tariffs on some of Italy's cheeses, sales dropped by 15 percent, according to Assolatte.

"If the price of Italian products increases for a long time," Italy's minister for business, Adolfo Urso, said in an interview, "consumers could turn to other products that are similar."

Some may have to.

"I love Italian cheese," Peter Rukaj, 66, a New York retiree, said recently as he picked up an American-made version of Dutch Gouda at a Whole Foods in Manhattan. "But I buy what I can afford."

Chris Roelli, a fourth-generation cheesemaker from Wisconsin, called American cheeses "world-class quality," first made by immigrants who "brought their craft with them." But he acknowledged that Italians have "thou-

sands-year-old recipes." And he said: "You can't recreate the taste of a place. The water here is going to be different to the water in Italy. It doesn't mean it's inferior or worse. It's just different."

In interviews, producers said they respected American cheese. Attilio Zanetti, whose company, Zanetti, is Italy's largest exporter of Grana Padano to the United States, said the American version was good — though "less good." What irks them, Italian purveyors say, is when consumers are misled and cannot make an informed choice.

Both Pecorino Romano and American-made Romano can be grated onto French fries and melted into Amatriciana pastas, said Gianni Maoddi, a producer of Pecorino Romano in Sardinia. But he said, "One is made with animals that are in stables and the other is made with animals that are grazing in Sardinia's immaculate fields."

"We are talking about two completely different things," he added.

A higher retail price in the United States could mean their cheeses risk becoming luxury items. "We don't want to only sell to billionaires," Mr. Zanetti said.

What's more, producers say, there is little or no alternative to the high-spending American market.

"Where should we go, to Uzbekistan?" Mr. Leonardi of Igor asked, adding that it takes years to build new markets. "Should we go to Kazakhstan?"

Some are confident that American consumers would remain loyal to Italian products.

"Parmigiano-Reggiano is not competing with local products," said Fabrizio Raimondi, the spokesman for the consortium of Parmigiano-Reggiano producers in Italy.

"It's as if we said caviar is competing with mortadella," he said.

Gli italiani temono che il palato americano si accontenterà dell' "Italian sounding"

