

Research report

The slow pace of institutional change in the Italian food system

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Abstract

Recent surveys show that Italians have little trust in the food they eat. This seems at odds with the world-wide popularity of Italian food, and the very prominent role that the agro-food sector has in the national economy and culture. This paper aims to explain this apparent contradiction by examining recent political and economic changes in the food sector.

From the analysis it emerges that, facing institutional crises and food scandals, Italian politicians have left the task of reassuring consumers to the market. However, the market actors' strategy has been to prioritise the discourse of food quality, but give little weight to some other important preoccupation of consumers, such as safety. To address these concerns a more proactive role of the State would be required. An actual concern of public institutions with consumer needs, institutional efficiency, transparency and accountability emerges as a crucial factor in restoring and maintaining trust.

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Introduction: gourmands who do not trust

In Italy, the agro-food sector is not only crucial for the national economy, but it also represents a strong factor in cultural identification. Pizza, spaghetti, olive oil and ice-cream are but some of the symbols of Italy abroad. Italians are proud of their culinary tradition and its fortune abroad, and many have cherished the recent decision to locate the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) in Parma as due acknowledgment of the city as the European capital of food (Interview Coldiretti; INALCA).

However, the comparative survey carried out by the TRUSTINFOOD research project reveals that levels of trust in food in Italy are some of the lowest in Europe, and most importantly, this attitude does not seem to be related to particular products that have been the object of recent food scandals, but is generalised to all foods (Poppe & Kijarnes, 2003).

This data seems to corroborate the findings of other studies on trust levels. Already in the 1950s Edward

Banfield called “amoral familism” the deep mistrusts that Italians show toward others, except members of one's own family (Banfield, 1958). More recently a wealth of empirical data has attested to a lack of trust in many basic institutions such as political parties, unions, big industrial companies and courts (see for example: [European Values Survey, 1999–2000](#)).

These observations help us to put into context the findings from the TRUSTINFOOD survey; it would, however, be too simplistic to understand the level of trust in food simply as a reflection of the general mistrust of institutions. In fact, this cannot explain many of the peculiarities of the Italian consumer emerging from the survey. In particular, when compared to other European consumers, Italians seem to give a remarkable relevance to aspects such as personal relationships with the staff of the shop where they purchase food, and its origin. Moreover, they declare a strong preference for food produced locally and nationally, and a high concern for the taste and safety of beef. On the other hand, they tend to be less concerned with the importance of the dietetic aspects of food, as well as its price, as illustrated in [Fig. 1](#).

This article suggests that the survey findings can be explained by looking at the changes and developments that

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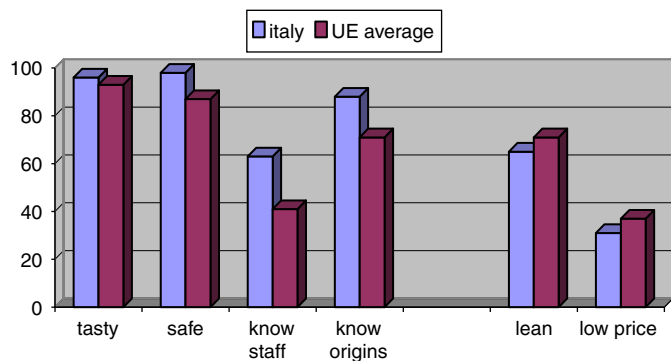


Fig. 1. Percentage that gives importance to *taste*, *safety*, *knowing staff*, *knowing origins*, *to be lean* and *low price* (for beef). Weighted results. Source: TIF survey, November 2002.

The development of Italian agro-food sector

Between 1992 and 1994, Italy underwent the most severe political crisis in its republican history, and witnessed a sudden collapse in a political order that had held for about 45 years. A series of scandals were uncovered, and the lack of transparency, the heaviness of bureaucracy and more general disaffection to politics deeply affected the debate in the public sphere. A serious budget deficit, deteriorating public services, and a sharp decline in Italians' trust in their politicians contributed to the delegitimatising crisis and led to important institutional reforms (Della Porta & Vannucci, 1999).

In the agro-food sector, the impact of such a crisis was very powerful. For decades "Italian agriculture was a protected zone where small and large companies were largely subsidised by the state and the European Community, to say nothing of the political pressure and the electoral power of the two most important agricultural associations, Coldiretti and Confagricoltura" (Ginsborg, 1998, p. 45). Such a system reached a profound crisis in the early 1990s culminating in 1993 with the bankruptcy of Federconsorzi, a cooperative organisation under the aegis of the Ministry of Agriculture, which was in charge, among other things, of the management of agricultural public subsidies. In the same year, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry was abolished, under the pressure of political and economic scandals. These events disrupted the important institutional, political and economic equilibrium that governed the national agricultural system, and demanded new institutional arrangements to respond to the demands of disenchanted citizens, and overcome the corruption and bureaucratisation that had characterised the *Prima Repubblica*.

The centralised power of the state was identified as a main cause of the inefficiency of the system. Accordingly, decentralisation was one of the main institutional changes, and a tendency towards federalism gave increasing decisional power to the regions. Agricultural policy is, nowadays, mainly a matter of regional policy including the tasks of managing agricultural subsidies and providing for rural development plans. At the same time the growing importance of EU food policy and regulations has demanded reforms and adjustments at a national institutional level, as we shall see in the next section. During the 1990s, the most important changes in the Italian food system were initiated in response to European regulation. While structural reform did not materialise, the proliferation of EU legislation on foodstuffs confirmed the leading role that supranational standards have assumed in the country, with a polling effect on national initiative. Yet if EU directives have been transposed into the national legislation, the actual implementation of regulation has been more difficult. The national institutions are often designed in such a way that, in order to enact EU regulation, a thorough reform and re-organisation will be needed. To give an example, the creation of a national

have interested the national food system in the last 15 years. The institutional transformations that the country underwent at the beginning of the 1990s—in particular the passage from the so-called "*Prima Repubblica*"¹ to the current political system—have intersected with the new international food policy inaugurated in the same years by the WTO and EU. As a result important shifts of responsibility have occurred, in particular in the division of tasks between private and public actors.

The next section outlines these political changes and their effects on the agro-food sector. We thereafter present the responses of the Italian food operators to the consumer lack of trust; this is what we have called the 'strategy of quality'. Some major factors that influence the levels of trust in Italy are then identified: a lack of vertical and horizontal coordination among the various institutions responsible for food, and a lack of public accountability. This latter point is analysed in the following section, which focuses on the role of consumers. We conclude with some general remarks on food trust systems in Italy.

Along with secondary literature and the results from the TRUSTINFOOD questionnaire (Poppe & Kijarnes, 2003) the materials for our analysis are: (i) 25 qualitative interviews with representatives of public authorities, technical institutes, retailers, caterers, food manufacturers and civil society organisations (these were carried out from January to November 2003 and are indicated in the text with the name of the organisation that the key informant represented); (ii) position documents, reports, official statistics, parliamentary debates produced by the aforementioned actors in the period 1995–2003; and (iii) analysis of press coverage of food related question during 2002, and the two BSE crisis in 1996 and 2001 in Italy. Both interviews and documents were collected in two Italian regions, Emilia-Romagna and Calabria, which are representative of regional variations across the national territory (Putnam, 1994).

¹By *Prima Repubblica* social scientists mean the political system that governed Italy from the second after war up to the institutional crisis of the early 1990s, which is briefly described later.

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