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Tiziana Carlino, Executive Director, Italian Chamber of Commerce in Bulgaria: Authentic Cuisine Preserves Italy's Spirit

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Interview with Tiziana Carlino, Executive Director of the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Bulgaria, for the "International Survey: Bulgaria-Italy" of Novinite.com (Sofia News Agency).

What are the main objectives and activities of the "Italian Restaurants Around the World" initiative?

Transforming Italian hospitality around the world into a tool to protect and promote Italian products is the aim of the "Italian Hospitality, Italian Restaurants Around the World" initiative. In particular, the main goal is to let those who dream of a trip to Italy "taste" the most genuine flavor of the country in their own homeland.

Promoting the quality of Italian products, their values of tradition, culture, know-how, by identifying the restaurants that guarantee respect of the quality standards of Italian hospitality means enhancing the image of Italy as both a tourist destination and the place of origin of quality products.

The essential requirements for the assessment and the possible certification of the restaurants concern, not only a menu that must include Italian dishes and recipes or Italian DOP and IGP labels, but also an obviously Italian style for the interiors, because when people speak of Italy they associate it with design, beauty and history, as well as good food and wine.

Thanks to a widespread marketing strategy and to the constant commitment of all the players involved – Unioncamere, National Tourist Research Institute (ISNART), the Italian Chamber of Commerce Abroad – this initiative is helping to bring our food specialties to the world, giving a concrete contribution to the transmission of the true taste of our tradition and to their protection against imitations (the Italian gastronomic sector is, in fact, the victim of a counterfeit that costs each year approximately 500 billion to our economy).

After the first year of activity, during which more than one thousand restaurants have joined the project, the promotional campaign in 2011 seeks to develop the network of restaurants, increase the number of those to be the subject of certification; maintain and give life to the network, promote the restaurants already certified and to use them as ambassadors of typical Italian products, to discourage "Italian sounding" and foster a better and greater use of Italian products.

The Campaign will set up promotional events for the Italian Hospitality brand, also with the aim of promoting abroad a number of important events, such as the anniversary of the Unification of Italy and the Italian Republic, the 'Italian Quality Seal Restaurant Award 2011' (July 2011) and the week of the Mediterranean diet (November 2011) that obtained last year the important recognition as worthy of World Heritage status by UNESCO.

The restaurants listed will be provided, in addition to the attribution of the plate "Italian Hospitality, Italian Restaurants Around the World", with an even stronger media exposure and publicity, through the creation of a catalogue of the "Guide to Italian hospitality" and a recipe book. They will be present on social networks and portals, creating an application for Smartphone, participating in a great closing event in Italy.

Last but not least, a communications campaign is therefore created in the framework of the Italian Festival in Bulgaria targeting consumers and inviting them to try the Italian cuisine at the certified Italian Hospitality: for 2 weeks (from 21 to 26 June) they will offer a special menu to celebrate the anniversary of the Unification of Italy. An original exercise that will stimulate the creativity of the chefs in inventing recipes using the colors of our flag.

Italian restaurants are becoming increasingly popular in Sofia. Are there Italian restaurants in Bulgaria with adequately high quality?

In its first airing abroad, the Italian project 'Hospitality' was implemented in Bulgaria only in the city of Sofia, where it attracted the active participation and keen interest from several restaurateurs serving an Italian brand in their gastronomic offerings.

What you mean by 'quality' and how it is evaluated within the framework of this project is established by the governing body of the initiative (namely the Coordinating Committee, chaired by Unioncamere and composed of representatives of ministries, the industry associations and institutions concerned), the task of which also includes the definition and updating of the 10 rules of good Italian hospitality listed in a specific Technical Guideline valid at international level.

I would therefore point out that the role of our Italian Chamber of Commerce is to collect the membership requests and, subject to formal checking of application documents, admit the businesses to the next phase of evaluation.

The candidates are considered by the Evaluation Committee (technical policy body composed of experts representatives of key institutions and organizations involved, including E.N.I.T. – National Tourism Agency, F.I.P.E.- Italian Federation of Public Operations, Federalimentare, Confagricoltura, C.I.A.- Confederation of Italian Farmers), based on prior determination of compliance with requisites for the certification: "Italian Hospitality, Italian Restaurants around the World."

In 2010, the quality brand was awarded to 7 restaurants in Bulgaria out of 15 who participated in the complete process of evaluation. This is not only a recognition for restaurants, but also a guarantee of proven quality for their customers.

The Certificate recognizes that restaurants have excelled not only in their interpretation of the gastronomic Italian culinary tradition, but also in their use of food products of Italian origin.

Their creation of a convincing Italian restaurant environment, thanks to the presence of staff who know how to relate with their customers in Italian, has also been acknowledged.

Moreover they offer a wide selection of DOCG Italian wine and use high quality olive oil. Their menus are written in English and, of course, the chef has demonstrated professional experience of Italian cuisine of a high standard.

The verification of the requirements nominated in the regulations and the annual maintenance of the standard is carried out through an inspection by the Italian Chamber of Commerce Abroad.

In addition, in September will be launched the second selection process with the collection of new nominations of restaurateurs interested, and it will be also extended to other cities in Bulgaria.

We therefore invite you, restaurateurs and customers, to notify us of these Italian restaurants that you deem worthy to receive the prestigious certification, so that we can continue to reward those who have gone down the road of quality gastronomy abroad.

How is the Bulgarian market special for Italian restaurant owners, what are its advantages and obstacles?

Certainly the Bulgarian market is a great attraction for the operators in the food business. Not only for the presence of many Italians who, like me, live in the country or visit it frequently for reasons of work, but especially for the great love and curiosity that the Bulgarians demonstrate to our culture.

Everybody knows that the 'pleasures of the table' represent a crucial and distinctive symbol of Italian culture.

Currently, thanks to the increasing availability of Italian products in the market, Italian or Bulgarian restaurateurs have the ability to characterize their gastronomic offerings with adequate variety and quality at an affordable price, although there is a significant difference in the system of VAT applied to food that increases the cost of food products in Bulgaria.

A serious obstacle for restaurant owners is represented by low quality of the personnel available who are poorly trained and often subject to a high turnover.

How does a country succeed in promoting its cuisine all around the world? Can Bulgaria also do it?

In order to promote the cuisine of a country, it is necessary to make consumers aware of how the food is part of a "national experience", which implies getting a deeper knowledge of the country's system of values, culture and the traditions of particular regions.

Promoting gastronomy means, therefore, putting at the centre of the world wine and food products and the regional identities of a Country. This is the result of input from producers, associations and professional bodies, and many recommendations which came from a wide range of central and local authorities.

The individuality and strong territorial links of the region's food enable them to withstand the impact of an international market that exerts pressure for a standardisation that threatens to turn them into industrial products and erase their unique character.

The key to success is to focus also on the aspects that have gained a growing importance over the last few years, so that you can increase the consumption of products related to the nutrition industry and at the same time promote good health by consuming healthy food and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Combining tradition and innovation both in production methods and marketing strategies is the only way to open up and take root in new markets. Only through the comprehensive promotion of our Country's treasures will we be able to avert a grey future that would destroy our food products and rob us of a slice of the Country's soul.

That's true also for Bulgaria. Bulgaria must therefore actively support the producers to protect traditional products, develop brand awareness and encourage a strategic positioning of its food industry and open up the access of small businesses into national and international markets.

More and more exotic cuisines have now found their way towards Europe and the US. How does the Italian food cope with this competitive environment?

On the one hand the globalisation process boosts many advantages in terms of new skills and information, but on the other hand, also in the catering and hospitality sector, it implies a fusion with the local traditions, preferences and attitudes towards nutrition and food.

The growing presence of foreign players, the use of non typical Italian products to prepare dishes and the monopoly of the food industry by multinational companies are all elements that contribute to change the model of Italian restoration abroad.

A changing lifestyle enforces new kinds of restoration. Together with the "slow" one, what became increasingly popular was the "fast food" system, so the Italian model had to cope with this competitive environment and now seeks to offer different types of food experience according to the requirements of different consumers all around the world.

That is why Italian restaurants abroad can identify a target of consumers who are more sensitive to and potentially interested in our cuisine.

Anyway, to have success in this sector it is essential to maintain an "Italian style", respecting traditional rules in preparing Italian recipes and dishes, using 100% Italian products, and creating an atmosphere that makes the guests feel comfortable and at ease. To eat Italian is to safeguard the history of the territory and ensure the survival of its traditional foods.

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