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Stepping On the Tongue of the Boot

A speaker of Italian wonders why other culinary languages don't get as mangled as hers does.

Posted January 17, 2011 by [Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco](#)

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Drinks had been generously poured, the company was charming and the anticipation of a delightful Italian meal stirred the taste buds. A waiter appeared, bearing rounds of crusty bread topped with an aromatic blend of tomatoes and basil in olive oil. I was all smiles—until he opened his mouth.

"Brush-etta?"

Illustration by Peter Thomas Ryan.

My appetite vanished. How good a restaurant could this be if the waiter can't even pronounce the food he's serving?

Everyone seems to know the proper way to say and spell the French foie gras, the Spanish paella, the Cuban mojito or the Cajun étouffée. But in restaurants plain and fancy, Italian gets mangled all the time. If I had a dollar for every time I've seen cappuccino spelled wrong or espresso expressed as espresso, I could easily afford the Maserati of all coffee machines. And speaking of coffee, in Italian it's caffè. Not what the French and Spanish quaff, which is café.

As for that bruschetta I was being served, it's properly pronounced broo-skeh-tah. Is that so much harder than fwah-grah?

When an Italian word follows a French one, as in pinot grigio (the white grape and wine of the same name), guess which one gets mucked up? The lowliest wine clerk correctly says pee-noh, but I've heard sommeliers who should know better recommend gree-jee-oh, when it's gree-joh. That's egregious.

Errors like that and rampant misspellings on menus leave speakers of Italian with a bad taste in their mouths. "It's offensive," says Giovanna Bellia LaMarca of Cliffside Park, a cookbook author and native of Italy who introduced the study of Italian to the Bronx High School of Science and now teaches at the Institute of Culinary Education in Manhattan. "I wonder why these people don't know that they don't know the language and seek a professional to help them out."

Culinarily speaking, I have a bone to pick with Messrs. Merriam and Webster, who maintain linguine and linguini are equally acceptable. Just because spaghetti ends in "i" doesn't mean all pasta has to. (Generally, masculine plurals take "i" endings, feminine plurals "e" endings.) Linguine (meaning "little tongues," which the pasta resembles) comes from lingue, Italian for—that's right—"tongues." There is no such word as linguini in Italian. With fettuccine and scaloppine, Merriam and Webster go even more loosey-goosey, allowing fettuccini, fettucine and fettucini, as well as scalopini. Try spelling bouillabaisse without either of those "i"s or quesadilla without one of those "s"s, and the spelling police will be all over you faster than you can say prosciutto, which is pronounced proh-shoot-oh, not pro-skew-toh or pruh-zhoot.

For the record, the luscious lemon liqueur is limoncello (lee-mohn-chehl-oh), not lemoncello. A salad of arugula, endive and radicchio (and that's rah-dee-kyoh, not ruh-dick-ee-o) is described as tricolore (tree-coh-loh-reh), its three colors representing the Italian flag. The deli meat cut from the top, or head (capo), of the pig's neck (collo) is spelled capocollo or capicollo, never capacollo, cappacolla, capacolla, capicola or anything else. Parma's incomparable hard cheese is Parmigiano-Reggiano. Anything prepared Parma-style is alla parmigiana. Deriving its name from oregano—origano in Italian—oreganata is not an Italian word, but one cooked up to appear so.

The Sicilian rice ball that resembles an orange (arancia) is an arancina (little orange), or arancine in the plural (arancini, in Sicilian), certainly not an "orancine," as one northern New Jersey restaurant lists it.

Skewered foods are spiedini, not spedini; grilled steak is bistecca ai ferri, not al ferri. (One upscale restaurant's online menu lists "bistecca ai ferri o casa"—aside from the misspelling, the words suggest that the diner has a choice of receiving a grilled steak or a house; what a deal!) A tart is a crostata, not a crostada. Tubular pastry shells filled with ricotta cream are cannoli (cannolo, if you want just one), not canolli or canollis or—mamma mia!—ganoles.

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Dried pasta is meant to be cooked al dente—as in the Italian word for tooth, pronounced dehn-teh, not dehn-tay, and certainly not, as I've heard one of the state's top CIA-trained chefs say, al Dante.

Speaking of the great Florentine poet of the Middle Ages, in Canto Three of his Inferno, he wrote, "...at first these sounds resounding made me weep;/tongues confused, a language strained in anguish/...And I, in the midst of all this circling horror,/ began, "Teacher, what are these sounds I hear?" Who knew Dante had been out to dinner in New Jersey?

Writer and editor Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco has a master's degree in Italian from Rutgers University. Her website is macfusco.com. She lives in Leonia.

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COMMENTS

Stepping on the Tongue of the Boot

Brava, Mary Ann!

Posted by: Barbara Marino, Chatham, NJ | Jan 25, 2011 04:21:45 AM |

Stepping on the Tongue of the Boot

So true! Especially since Italian is one of the easier languages as far as pronunciation goes.

Posted by: Linda Golba, Paramus | Jan 25, 2011 14:51:05 PM |

Stepping on the Tongue of the Boot

Grazie ,Mary Ann for hoping to correct some of these common errors---or should I say Grazi!!?!

Posted by: Donna Spagna, San Jose, Ca | Jan 25, 2011 17:13:57 PM |

An excellent article, but I see plenty of mistakes on French and even American menus. The point is...if the language isn't the one you were raised with, have the menu proofread and corrected by a native speaker. Please!

Posted by: Rick Rodgers, Maplewood, NJ | Jan 25, 2011 18:26:16 PM |

Stepping on the Tongue of the Boot

Stepping on the Tongue of the Boot

Bravissima, Mary Ann! It's about time someone is taking action to raise awareness of the misspellings and mispronunciations in the selections offered on Italian menus. I always correct mispronunciations by the waiter and emphasize the importance of authenticity to the owner as a reflection on his staff and establishment, while at the same time exposing his clientele to accurate terminology and pronunciation. It makes good business sense.

Posted by: Dolores M. Fabiano, Union City, NJ | Jan 27, 2011 00:01:18 AM |

So true. I have seen all of those misspelled entries, and more. I never could understand how anyone opening a restaurant would not get consultation if he/she did not know the language well. If I were to open a Chinese or Japanese restaurant, I would make sure to have someone who spoke the language read it, edit, revise it etc.

As usual, Italians are disrespected.

Posted by: Lena, Old Bridge | Jan 29, 2011 01:18:23 AM |

I teach Italian in a NJ High School, and these common errors are brought up all the time in my classroom. "Brush-etta", as all my students know, is my biggest pet-peeve! Brava!

Posted by: Marisa, North Haledon, NJ | Jan 28, 2011 19:55:40 PM |

Articolo

Grazie mille per questo articolo. Quel che ho sempre pensato e che non ho mai detto. Prossimamente, magari, puoi prender d'assalto i prodotti "italiani" con delle etichette vergognose per i loro errori.

Posted by: Lina Iaccarino, East Brunswick, NJ | Jan 28, 2011 20:50:01 PM |

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Articolo

Finalmente qualcuno che si preoccupa dello stato della nostra bella lingua. Si possono aggiungere altri nomi: Pasta e fagioli, lasagne e zucchine. Per la prima, ognuno ha la propria interpretazione e pronuncia. A volte mi chiedo se sono due parole italiane. La seconda, lasagna- io preparo le lasagne, mangio le lasagne, compro le lasagne, mi piacciono le lasagne. Potrei mangiarne solo una-lasagna.. ma non credo mi sazierebbe. Zucchini? Da quando, la zucchina, un sostantivo femminile e' diventato maschile? A meno che i trans sono presenti nell'agricoltura..
Grazie Mary Ann il tuo articolo e' tragico-comico ma ci aiuterà, spero, a non perpetuare lo status-quo.

Posted by: Teresa Iannacco, Rutherford, NJ | Jan 29, 2011 15:31:44 PM |

verissimo!

The observations made by Professoressa Fusco are the same ones I've been making for years! If you want to promote the Italian culture, especially the gastronomic culture, it is crucial that you use proper language on the menu and train the restaurant personnel to pronounce things properly.
Brava per quest'articolo comico ma anche verissimo! L'ho goduto tantissimo! Pero' e' la nostra risposibilita' informare alla gente le forme corrette nell'italiano!

Posted by: Mari-Celeste Massaro, Plainsboro | Jan 30, 2011 03:09:47 AM |

Stepping on the Tongue of the Boot!

Brava, brava, brava and grazie, Mary Ann, for writing this article. It expresses what I (and evidently many others) have felt for a long time.

There is a standard Italian language that unifies everyone and there is no excuse, with the resources available today, for such errors.

Very nicely written, accurate and fun to read. I've already given copies to all my students of Italian.

Posted by: Phyllis Ignozza, West Caldwell | Feb 02, 2011 20:00:55 PM |

You say po-ta-to, I say po-tah-to

Mary Ann,

I'm sorry you're offended, but you are missing a basic historical fact - most Italians who immigrated to NJ didn't speak Italian. They spoke their mother tongue. It wasn't until the television age that most Italians spoke Italian.

Italian as a single language is an artificial construct of Unification in 1861. Italy recognizes 12 'minority languages' while individual regions recognize more. UNESCO lists 31 endangered languages in Italy. This does not count local dialects.

Using a local dialect name for a food lets an educated diner learn and appreciate the local differences in cuisine.

So for me, I'll continue to eat pruh-zhoot like my Grandfather did. We'll have brah-jöl (rolling the final L) for dinner. And I won't tell you how we pronounce sfogliatelle.

Wikipedia's article on Languages in Italy http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Italy and the UNESCO Atlas of World Languages in Danger <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/> are starting points for exploring the linguistic diversity of Italy.

Yours in linguistic and culinary diversity,
Mark

Posted by: Mark, Wayne | Feb 06, 2011 15:50:16 PM |

Thanks Mary Ann

Italian is the standard language of Italy which was indeed unified as a political entity in 1861. If an Italian or an Italian American speaks a dialect, they should speak it with pride. However, when people speak a dialect, they should know that they are not speaking an incorrect form of Italian, they are speaking another language.

To call the national language of Italy an artificial construct doesn't merit a comment, and calling prosciutto, which has only one possible pronunciation, something other than "prosciutto" is simply an unacceptable parody of our beautiful language.

I speak, read and write Italian as well as Sicilian, I love both languages and I know the difference between the two.

When someone opens a restaurant, and uses Italian words or phrases on a menu or in a nationally viewed television cooking program, such terms should be edited by a person who knows the Italian language. Period. Basta.

Giovanna Bellia La Marca

Posted by: Giovanna Bellia La Marca, Cliffside Park, NJ | Feb 07, 2011 02:53:57 AM |

Galamad Nation

We need an escape from the "galamads" of the world. (that's what my family calls those who you describe in your article--or people that call the beloved fried seafood, calamari, galamad). It's so nice to know that you're a voice against the galamad nation that seems to be skewing the view of how New Jersey Italians ought to be viewed.

Food for Thought

Indeed, most of the Italians who arrived at the end of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century did not speak the "standard" Italian that has been disseminated through the mass media. Moreover, they were strongly discouraged from speaking their native tongues, so in some cases their language evolved into a mix of their regional Italian and English. Some of those pronunciations have made their way into American dictionaries and restaurants.

Those who enjoy Italian food should savor each bite of their prosciutto (prosciutti, in the plural), braciola (bracirole), and sfogliatella (sfogliatelle), no matter how they say them at home. But if they want to set those or any other Italian words in print, they would do well to put down their forks and pick up an authoritative reference work. "The Dictionary of Italian Food and Drink" by John Mariani is readily available on this side of the Atlantic.

Posted by: Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco, Leonia | Feb 08, 2011 14:31:44 PM |

Annoyed

Congratulations, you're an Italian American and you studied the language. Now you can order a meal at an Italian restaurant correctly. So, to not annoy you, I need to know a specific language before I visit an ethnic restaurant? I was thinking of going for sushi tonight. Do I need to take a language class first to say Unagi with a Japanese twang or can I just say eel roll? A lot of my Italian friends can be as annoying as this article. One of my friends corrected me the other day when I asked for some ricotta cheese. In Italy, there seems to be one way to say ricotta, but here, in the United States, it's proper English to say it either way, per the English dictionary, "ri-kot-uh, -kaw-tuh; It. Ree-kawt-tah". He still isn't convinced because, well, he's Italian.

Posted by: Eric , Weehawken | Feb 10, 2011 18:56:45 PM |

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