

## McItaly: Cons and.... Pros(?)

Maria Rita Latto (February 15, 2010)



Was the “McItaly” burger—the new McDonald’s hamburger made with Italian products—a good idea? Let's ask the Romans...

The promotion of the new McItaly burger in Italian [McDonald's](#) [2] was welcomed by controversy. The [Italian Minister of Agriculture](#) [3], Luca Zaia, defended his initiative before accusations of surrendering to the expansion of the multinational corporation and the consequent detriment to Italy's culinary tradition. The reason that led to the joint venture between two apparently different worlds is simple, according to Minister Zaia: McItaly is made using all- Italian beef, asiago cheese, and an artichoke spread. It will also increase the overall profit of Italian farmers dealing with the economic crisis by an average amount of 3.5 million euro (\$4.8 million) a month.

Should Minister Zaia's enthusiastic support for the project be considered as a sort of “white flag” in a country famous all over the world for its varied, delicious, and healthy cuisine? “Yes” seems to be the answer from the many critics who found the new burger so hard to swallow.

Carlo Petrini, the founder of [Slow Food](#) [4], an international movement that promotes the use of local, organic food and home cooking over fast foods and industrialized food chains, is certainly one of McItaly's greatest critic. His movement was founded in 1986 initially to protest against the opening of the first McDonald's restaurant in Italy and, more precisely, next to the Spanish Steps in Rome's historic center. In a recent article published on [La Repubblica](#) [5]'s front-page, he challenged Zaia to disclose the actual salaries of Italian farmers, as the minister's campaign insists that this good business deal will allow Italian agriculture to profit. Petrini also reminded Luca Zaia that "taste, like identity, has value only when there are differences."

On the other hand, the opposition [Democratic Party](#) [6] also noticed the improper use of an official government seal of approval for the new burger. McItaly's promotional campaign, indeed, features the "Under the patronage of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry" seal even though this kind of approval is usually given to museum exhibits or cultural events – and never to fast foods...

"I think it's legitimate to ask if Minister Zaia is working for Italy or McDonald's," stated Nicodemo Oliverio, the top Democratic Party lawmaker in the Chamber of Deputies' Agriculture Commission. He also wondered whether giving McDonald's such a designation would create a disparity within Italian food companies, thereby requiring intervention by the [Antitrust Authority](#) [7]. Minister Zaia was rather clear: the government has already partnered with McDonald's in order to promote Italian food such as parmigiano reggiano chesse, and over the next few weeks it is expected to come out with a new burger with smoked bacon and grilled onions, as well as an Italian salad.

All of these efforts aim to create new markets for Italian agriculture, a goal that is vital in the current economic crisis. Actually, at least until now, McDonald's has reached this goal: during the first week of sales, some 100,000 burgers have been sold, a level of success that surpassed expectations.

All of this stirred my curiosity, so I decided to take a look at the two McDonald's located near my home. My adolescent son came with me, so that I could get the opinion of an "expert" in the field (that is, someone who is not allowed to have the McExperience more than once a month). His verdict on the new burger was negative: "The beef and the asiago cheese are OK. The point is that the artichoke spread ruins the taste. The McRoyal DeLuxe is better!"

While there, I notice that, despite my son's opinion, the customers looked pleased with the new burger. I asked two bank employees sitting next to me how they liked it. Barbara, 35, was rather unhappy with the price: "In my opinion, it's nonsense to pay more than 7 euro for a hamburger, French fries, and a soda. At the same price I could buy a steak, a bag of salad ready to be dressed, and a roll and I'm sure that I'm eating healthy food." Her friend, Paolo, 30, confessed that he had heard about the McItaly so much that he decided to taste it: "It's unusual when compared to the other burgers. First, this bread is savory, while they use a sort of a sweet roll for the others. The blend of ingredients is also pleasant. After all, it was worth coming here to try it."

The majority of adolescents is satisfied with the new burger, even though they admit that they are more "fascinated" with the idea of eating real junk food like Americans, and that they automatically associate McDonald's with the Big Mac, their favorite.

Carlo, a retired grandfather sitting with his two grandchildren, was very critical about the initiative: "This campaign, that associates Italian products with junk food, threatens the image of Italy in the world; the real winner here is Mc Donald's." This said, I couldn't help but ask him why he was there. "My grandchildren would kill me if I didn't take them here at least twice a month."

Caterina, 20, a high school student, was rather skeptical of what she defined as the "contradictory initiative of the government." "I cannot understand how Minister Zaia proclaims himself to be a defender of our local food while promoting a partnership with McDonald's. Moreover, if he supports



something like McItaly, I don't see how he can allow this ad campaign to defend our cuisine 'against kebabs' just like his party [Lega Nord](#) [8] did in Northern Italy!"

The new McItaly contains 715 calories, the 36% of the daily caloric needs of a woman. It also contains 3.3 grams of sodium, 66% of the total amount of salt an adult should consume every day. When comparing it to the Big Mac, which contains "only" 495 calories and 2.3 grams of salt, you will find, surprisingly, that the Italian burger benefitting from patronage under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is less than healthy, for both children and adults alike.

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