Chapter 3

An Investigation on Cultural Cuisine of Mainland China: Management Implications for Restaurant Operators

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the determining factors of the popularity of Italian cuisine in mainland China and attitude of restaurant patrons toward Italian cuisine. Published literature suggests that Italian cuisine abroad was first made familiar by Italian nationals who immigrated to countries in Europe, the Americas and Oceania. The growing popularity of Italian cuisine around the world today continues to shape the global evolution of ethnic cuisines because of its taste and simplicity of food preparation. Chinese patrons support this theory however; they find that Italian restaurants in China have expensively priced menus, and that they doubt the authenticity of Italian food preparation and question originality of Italian ingredients being used. These perceived negative factors identified could hamper this world-renowned cuisine from sustaining its popularity in China. The study used an online survey methodology and applied statistical analysis techniques to determine the factors relative to the popularity of Italian cuisine in mainland China and to the attitude of Chinese restaurant patrons. The results will contribute to the body of knowledge of hospitality marketing and tourism related studies and will help hospitality operators and future investors of new restaurant ventures in the decision making process whether to invest and operate an Italian restaurant in mainland China.

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INTRODUCTION

Historical records show that food has always played an important role in the cultural evolution of mankind (Camillo, Kim, Ryan and Moreo, 2005). Eating culture, rituals, and food preferences based on environmental and social conditions emerged steadily over time (Camillo et al., 2005). Societies, in turn, adopted specific food preferences according to taste, environment, and local economy. Foods and drinks have become culturally symbolic and eating habits have evolved to reflect people’s own tastes and preferences (Camillo, Connolly & Kim, 2008). Italian food culture based on traditional Italian cooking has evolved into one of the world’s most prevalent. Italian cuisine, with its adaptability in preparation, has become the most popular cuisine in the world. Despite rapid changes in international trade and profound lifestyle changes, Italy remains unsurpassed in its culinary traditions and accomplishments. Since China opened the doors to international trade, Chinese consumers have been exposed to both Italian cuisine and Italian food and beverage products. With the onset of mercantilism, restaurants have gained popularity across Asia. Although the concept of globalization was non-existent centuries ago, many indigenous foods and cooking styles, such as Italian were exported from one country to another by merchants (Gernet, 1962; Wang, 1982; West, 1997). Clearly such historical trends have significantly affected people’s eating habits. Since the late 1980s a large number of Italian restaurants have opened across mainland China. Italian food and beverage exports to China tripled in just a few years. From 2008 to 2009 alone exports in this sector increased by 18.26% (ISTAT, 2008). This is despite total exports declining by -5% due to the recent global economic downturn (ICE-Istituto del Commercio Estero, 2010). This paper analyzes the popularity of Italian cuisine in mainland China and proposes useful recommendations for hospitality operators and future restaurateurs regarding ethnic cuisine trends and the evolution of Italian cuisine in mainland China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Evolution of Italian Cuisine

Italian cuisine, as it is known today, is the result of the culinary evolution born of centuries of cultural, social and political changes. Significant change occurred with the discovery of the New World which helped shape much of what is known as Italian cuisine today with the introduction of items such as potatoes, tomatoes, bell pepper and maize; all central parts of Italian cuisine which were not introduced in scale until the 18th century (Del Conte, 2004). From England and to South America, to Australia and anywhere where Italians emigrated, Italian cuisine eventually became an integral part of the host nations’ diet. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Italian restaurants emerged throughout Europe, the United States, South America and Oceania. Large numbers of Italians had immigrated to these regions following the economic downturn World War II had left behind in Italy. During and after their settlement, Italian immigrants expressed their identity through gastronomic heritage reinforcing their sense of belonging to their native place they left behind (Schlüter, 2011). Concurrently, as U.S. hotel chains expanded around the world, operators benchmarked their success on Italian restaurants and began to integrate Italian style restaurants into their own operations. Chefs from around the world also began to capitalize on the success of Italian cuisine by using local ingredients to promote dishes that did not even exist in Italy. One of the most revolutionary new dishes, “Pasta Primavera,” designed for vegetarians, was created at the Italian restaurant Le Cirque in New York; it had no red sauce topping and no meat balls (Maccioni, 2002). The very first Italian restaurant operated outside