

Foreign names taste better

by Sabine Eiche

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Have you noticed that food products labelled with foreign words or names are more enticing than ones carrying an English identification? Confronted with two jars containing the same product, and costing the same, one labelled "Tomato Sauce," the other "Sugo di Pomodoro," which would you choose? I bet most of you would go for the "Sugo di Pomodoro." Why? Perhaps because those soft and soothing syllables conjure up the image of a sun-bathed terrace overlooking the glorious Bay of Naples, with you in the picture, sitting at a table, about to guide the first forkful of perfectly cooked pasta to your mouth. "Tomato Sauce" rings of something humdrum, something at the back of your cupboard that you turn to when you've run out of what you really want.

The Italians don't have that problem with the names of their pasta sauces, perhaps because there is never anything humdrum about them. They are identified simply by their ingredients. But pasta sauces produced in North America seem to need a catchy name, typically an Italian word that rolls easily off the tongue. It doesn't necessarily have to have anything to do with the ingredients, or even with food. The sound of the word is the key to its success.

I went on a reconnaissance mission to a few local supermarkets and found that two of the most popular sauces were "Prego Pasta Sauce" and "Bombolina Pasta Sauce." "Prego" is a common word in Italian, with multiple meanings. It's the first person singular of the verb "pregare," which means to pray or supplicate. You also say "Prego?" to mean "Excuse me?" Shopkeepers say "Prego?" when they want to know if they can help you. And when someone

thanks you, you respond “Prego!” – “You’re welcome!” Of all these choices, perhaps the last lends itself best to the pasta sauce. Prego Pasta Sauce = You’re Welcome Pasta Sauce.

The makers of “Bombolina Pasta Sauce” picked a more obscure word. It must have been the playful rhythm of “bombolina” that won them over – it’s very close to “bambolina,” the Italian for little doll. But in fact there’s nothing playful about “bombolina,” which is the word for a small cylinder containing compressed fluid – like those found in fire extinguishers.

Now, foreign words have great allure also in Italy. The Italians delight in adopting English words and names for products (though not food) and businesses. To English speakers, the choices can sometimes seem bizarre and very often hilarious.

For example, in emulation of the North American way of life, Italians soon introduced gas stations with self-service pumps. But they are not generally referred to as “self-service,” perhaps because it takes too long to pronounce. To an Italian, such gas stations are simply “selfs.”

Boutiques selling clothing is a category that favours names composed of English words. I remember one that made me wonder if the owner realized how ironically fitting it was. The store, selling designer kids’s clothes, was called the “Smack Boutique.”

My all-time favourite, however, is a product for unclogging kitchen and bathroom drains. It is known as “Niagara” (pronounced Knee-ah-gah-rah), made by Mr. Muscolo. I think Mr. Muscolo hit bull’s-eye with that name. Who could resist his promise of water rushing down the drain with the force of those famous waterfalls?