

THE SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

Food and drink are as close to Italy's heart as beautiful clothes and fast cars. Italian food styles have a big influence on American culture.

'Wake up and smell the coffee' may be a forceful invitation to get acquainted with reality but is there any more evocative smell than real coffee, made from freshly-ground beans? Just thinking about it can bring a smile to one's face. Percolators have been around a while and the steady plop-plop as they go through their process is a familiar sound – but all it does is feed your impatience. If you want a good cup of coffee, you want it now, not in half an hour! The latest trend for the impatient is the cafetiere. It has the virtue of delivering coffee quickly but it uses a lot of raw material and it doesn't really deliver the aroma that's part of the whole experience. For a proper cup of real coffee, you need a proper espresso machine – as coffee bars, restaurants and homes across the country have found. Nothing else provides the experience and the quality of the real thing.

The espresso machine as we know it today was invented by Achille Gaggio, who filed patent number 365726 on September 5, 1938. There has been misunderstanding of the name of the machine – it isn't 'espresso', implying very fast, it's espresso, which is related to the way hot water is forced through the ground coffee, picking up the intense flavor as it goes through. The original machines relied on hand-presses; today's models are much more automated – just about everything from grinding beans to producing the finished article can be done at the push of a button.

Gaggia's invention was the first modern steam-free coffee maker, and it was sufficiently successful that, in 1948, he established **Gaggia Spa** (www.gaggia.com) to manufacture it. Just under 30 years later, the company he founded spread its wings from the commercial market and began producing machines for the home. They've proved hugely popular and any self-respecting coffee aficionado is going to have one of their very own in their kitchen. Not that Gaggia is alone. Purchasers in the US marketplace are presented with a wide variety of brands and styles; **Ala di Vittoria's** (www.bfcsrl.it) offers a high quality and very reliable small-to-medium capacity La Valentina range; **ECM Lux Sa** (www.ecmespressomachines.com) successfully addresses a similar market. If a coffee bar or restaurant wants to make a statement, then a picture paints a thousand words and the image of **Elektra srl's** (www.elektrasrl.com) Belle Epoque commercial range says a great deal. They could have been transplanted from a 1930s science fiction movie – you half expect them to blast themselves off into space or maybe make their way to your table under their own steam. If you want a more conventional appearance, then the same manufacturer's Barlume series looks the part. **Rancilio Spa's** (www.rancilio.com) Classe 8 DE has automatic dosage and water level controls and has the option of automatic technological steaming control for frothing and heating milk. Then there's **La Cimbali Spa** (www.cimbali.it), **La Vibiemme Spa** (www.lavibiemme.it), **La Spaziale Spa** (www.laspaziale.com) ...the list is long and testifies to the success of Italian ingenuity in the food business – and how it strikes a chord all over the world.

“It’s about image and the quality of the machines, which are superior to products from Spain and China,” said Jim Piccinich, Partner with 1st-Line Equipment, LLC, which imports and distributes Gaggia machines from its base in Hazlet, New Jersey. Gaggia built a very strong foundation in the 1960s and 70s in the American marketplace, he observed, and its reputation is due in no small part to the involvement of US distributors, like 1st-Line, which provides technical and aftermarket support, as well as sales service.

“A good service company, with established relationships, help to improve efficiency and quality,” said Piccinich. Innovation and creativity are ongoing factors that maintain the Italian strength in the market. The superior reputation helps even when exchange rates go the wrong way. “The US market is price sensitive and the Euro is strong against the Dollar. We overcome that by providing superior service; our sales revenues have risen in proportion to the exchange rate increases.” Which shows that, even in an age of convenience and ‘junk foods’, America still loves quality – and is prepared to pay for it.

Coffee machines are great but they’re only a small part of the Italian food equipment and machinery industry. The US is one of its largest markets and it’s growing; in 2005, the country imported \$67.3 million of Italian catering equipment, which was more than 34 percent higher than in 2003 – and that figure wasn’t flattered by strong Euro exchange rates, as it was before the sharp rise. Only Canada had a higher market share. In 2005, Italy exported \$75 million worth of food processing machinery, a little over 12 percent of all imports in the sector and second only to Germany. The figures for import of catering equipment are steadily rising, across the board but food processing can be more cyclical. Italian penetration of the market is gaining ground; its dollar value of imports into the US is growing and its share in the first six months of 2006 was up more than 13 percent, compared with the same period the year before; Germany’s share declined in the same period, as did those of France, Canada and ‘other countries’, which includes the low-cost areas of the Far East.

Given Italy’s history, it probably won’t come as a surprise to learn that bakery equipment is one of its leading sectors and pizzerias are a major part of that – to the extent that pizza businesses for sale specifically mention Italian-branded ovens and preparation machinery in their advertisements. Rotisseries, slicing and separation equipment and juice processing are also included. There is, however, one product that’s closer to the typical food processing and manufacturing activity that would generally be thought of, but still retains a distinctly Italian flavor. Its pasta production machinery is a long way from the manual mixers and drying racks that can be found in some home enthusiasts’ kitchens. These are technologically advanced million dollar systems, not just ‘machines’.

“We design and produce industrial dry pasta manufacturing equipment,” said Dr Luigi Fava, president of **Fava Spa** (www.fava.it), which is headquartered in Cento, a few miles north of Bologna, Italy. “What we are making is integrated production lines, which take the raw ingredients – semolina from durum wheat, water, spinach for verde lines, maybe added

vitamins – and run automatically to produce the desired outcome. They can produce a range of different products, from long-cut to short-cut pasta; specialty shapes; and couscous. They mix, shape and pre-dry everything from spaghetti to falfale.”

Specialty presentations have become more popular in recent years. Not just the section profiles but the arrangements, as well. Fava’s GM machine has been specifically designed to deliver nests, coiled or folded pasta, lasagna, junbo shells, cannelloni, manicotti, and so on. Predrying is by either traditional vertical or horizontal method; in the latter case, the pasta is held on trays and passed through a high temperature, high ventilation process and then carried into a series of trays of various dimensions, to ensure the shape is maintained. It makes excellent use of space; Fava maintains that no other dryer of similar dimensions provides as much usable surface area, which even caters to very lightweight products. Consistency is vital, of course, and equal drying is ensured by the fact that all the trays pass through exactly the same ventilation points. At the end of the production cycle is the stabilizing area, with cooling provided by two units fitted with cold water coils. The line concludes with two combined tray storage systems, to cope with packaging machine downtime or changeover. By separating packaging from the production cycle, the machine is inherently more flexible and that characteristic is emphasized by the choice of bulk or package emptying. If the production run is to be packaged, the machine will convey it automatically to the relevant packaging system.

“Our lines cover anything from 50 to 300 square feet and are designed to incorporate a range of variables,” Dr. Fava said. “They’re designed for speed and efficiency of operation. Machine controllers are required for changeovers, from spaghetti to linguini, for example, but they’re essentially highly automatic and will adjust to changes in requirements as a result of their inbuilt programming.” Those adjustments aren’t just about the product being manufactured. Different types of pasta have different recipes; it’s largely about the proportions, which will alter the consistency of the finished product but there are other variables, as well. Ambient temperature and humidity will affect the way the ingredients work together; Fava machines adjust automatically, which helps the owners to deliver consistent product. A brand’s quality is its reputation and variability simply can’t be tolerated. The quality associated with Fava has enabled it to build and maintain the leadership position in the American market.

“We sell three out of every four pasta production lines installed in the United States,” Dr. Fava said. The company works through distributors in America, which raises the question: how do you ensure the best possible levels of support for your customers, when you’re 4000 miles away?

“We realize that customer service is a fundamental ingredient for any kind of commercial success, and that’s particularly true in the US market,” he said. “Fava has a history of locally-based sales and service personnel and a ready supply of replacement parts. We have been selling direct to the US, rather than through a partner, since the mid-1990s and we have built up an effective understanding of the market. We invest a lot of time in

educating and training our customers on maintenance schedules, the sort of parts they should keep readily available, and where to get support quickly. Our machines are designed to run 24/7 and the time zones can actually be helpful; calls out of regular hours can be made direct to Italy, where we will act quickly to ensure customers get the attention they need.” The sales levels and market dominance are still surprising, though. Why do Americans prefer to buy from an Italian, rather than a domestic manufacturer?

“It’s about competitiveness,” he said. “We are active in the international market and there are only three major companies who are. The competition drives us constantly to improve our product. There was a US-based company but it foundered when it wasn’t able to keep up with the advances in the international markets. We have strengths in design, innovation, creativity and quality but the key factor, for us, is response to customer needs. Every customer has specific requirements in product characteristics, layout, available raw materials and utilities – and the skill levels of its employees. We regard every project as a new challenge, so it’s very rare to find two of our pasta production lines absolutely identical. We make a virtue out of customization, where some competitors will focus on standardization and cost-saving. For us, quality and response to customer needs are paramount.”

It’s self-evident, but any sort of cooking or food production requires temperature control and that fact becomes even more critical in the commercial world. A US supermarket chain is currently trialing a new water temperature control and distribution system in its bakeries that promises better control and more consistency throughout the work day – which will lead to less waste and increased customer satisfaction. It’s being produced for them by **STM Products srl** (www.stm-products.com), an electronics company based in Verona, Italy. Its products are used for a range of applications, including railroad safety, in-car communications for elevator safety, and the Dolphin Dissuasive Device, a sonar component that persuades dolphins and other cetaceans to avoid fishing nets. One of its biggest divisions deals with the food and catering businesses; it manufactures water purifiers and ionic exchange water purifiers, as well as water control systems.

“Bakeries need chilled water for mixing the dough – if it’s too warm, it ‘proves’ too quickly because the yeast is too active and quality is affected. Traditional solutions use a big water tank, surrounded by a serpentine coil, and equipped with a compressor and pump. Normally they work all night and fill the tank with chilled water for the first batch in the morning. The problem is that they can’t regenerate quickly enough and so the temperature will vary during the day,” said Martin Ipuche, sales manager for STM. “We use different technologies to give customers water at a constant 36 degrees Fahrenheit. We use different compressors, stainless steel heat exchangers and a smaller tank, which can regenerate more quickly.” It’s a great idea but established traditions take some challenging.

“A bakery may have a need for, say 200, liters per hour (about 44 gallons) and they wonder that if a machine with a smaller tank can deliver it,” he said. “In fact, 200 liters an hour means nothing, on its own. You have to ask: what is the ambient temperature? And,

crucially, what's the water flow usage level? Thinking just in terms of the water tank is misplaced: you have to think of usage. We can show customers that our equipment delivers the water they need, at constant temperature. That means they get better products, less waste and higher levels of customer satisfaction. Also, if the bakery isn't working 24/7, the water system can be left off overnight, which saves energy. The capacity is 1800 watts, the same as other chillers, but it regenerates its contents very quickly, so users get more for the same consumption." STM's equipment is sophisticated and controlled by some complex electronics.

"The electronic control systems make them easier to operate," he said. But the concern of any business with short lead times – and bakery has very short lead times – is reliability. The more complex the machinery, the greater the risk of breakdown, surely. "We have machines operating all over the world – in the US, South America, in Europe, the Middle East – and their owners very rarely call us. Our equipment is strong and reliable and local support is provided by local distributors. We work in the US through American-based distributors; they have their own engineers, who we train to service our equipment." As well as water systems, STM makes electronic controls for ovens, mixers and other food production equipment. "We work with manufacturers to their requirements and specifications but we also work with them at the design stage, to ensure their equipment delivers the desired results. We test every piece before delivery to ensure it's reliable. We have our own research and development people – our water doser meters are in their fifth or sixth evolution. That comes from understanding our customers and their needs and working to satisfy them." STM has achieved ISO9000:2000 accreditation and its automatic cleaning system, which ensures customers' pumps, heat exchangers and entire water system is clean at all times, recently won an award at the European bread manufacturing exhibition in Paris.

"We've been producing water dosers for 20 years. We produce 22 different models of water meters and 88 models of chillers. We work with customers for special needs – as we're doing with the American supermarket group – and we're proud to be the leaders in our field," Ipuche said.

Creative coffee makers; complete pasta and bakery lines; automated equipment with precise monitoring, measuring and metering; electronic controls – and you thought Italian cooking was about flair and secret family recipes!