

# Venice/Japan International Food+ Symposium 2021 An Interdisciplinary Symposium

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**Abstract** This co-authored paper aims to be a brief overview of the *Venice/Japan International Food+ Symposium* themes and panels, with a particular focus on the speeches held during the three-day conference and not included as papers in this volume.

**Keywords** Interdisciplinary. Transversal. Food. Italy. Japan. Symposium. Venice. Soft power. Media.

**Summary** 1 Food+: The Power of Food. – 2 Food+ Perceptions. – 3 Food+ Diplomacy. – 3 Food+ New Challenges. – 4 Food+ Design. – 5 Food+ Trade. – 6 Food + Investments and Trends. – 7 Food + Sustainability. – 8 Food + Arts and Media. – 9 Conclusions.

*Venice/Japan International Food+ Symposium*, held from the 18th to 20th of March 2021, brought together experts from the most different fields, who analysed the theme of food from their particular perspectives. Their contribution to the multidisciplinary dialogue at the center of this Symposium constituted a meaningful occasion of confrontation between the public, the experts themselves and the organising committee.

The main innovation of the *Venice/Japan Food+ Symposium* was its transversal perspective, which made possible the involvement of representatives from cultural and economic institutions as well as

journalists and media operating between Italy and Japan in an open discussion.

## 1 Food+: The Power of Food

Food is part of everyone's life: we eat food on special occasions or during traditional celebrations, as well as in our everyday life. Food, while being necessary to our wellness, has a cultural and symbolic dimension which makes it an important subject of investigation. As Professor Bonaventura Ruperti highlighted, food is constantly being used both in religious rituals and in traditional performative arts in Japan, with a symbolic-metaphorical function (representation of seasonal change, etc.) (see Bonaventura Ruperti, "Food Culture and Traditional Performing Arts in Japan").

In a contemporary globalised society, food, often considered as a form of soft power (Nye 2004)<sup>1</sup> due to its cultural and symbolic dimensions (Reynolds 2012, 49), has become to be at the centre of several debates in the most diverse fields (culture, arts, journalism, macro-economics, trade, etc.). As Kentaro Ide (JETRO, Milan) pointed out, macroeconomic elements are closely linked to culture(s) diffusion, and during this symposium we considered food as an important element which gives us the possibility to analyse bigger phenomena through an innovative perspective and the interrelation between different fields.

## 2 Food+ Perceptions

Naoki Toneri, Kazepro Inc., explained how Italian products (cars, food, fashion) are perceived by the Japanese public and how this perception has changed in the last thirty years. In the particular context of food, Naoki Toneri explained how Japanese consumers gradually got used to Italian food during the last decades. While during the 1990s people used to go to Italian restaurants only on special occasions, nowadays Italian food has become integrated in the everyday life of Japanese people. Japanese chefs are professionally trained, Italian food chains across different price ranges have increased in number, making Italian food something very common in Japan. Naoki

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<sup>1</sup> Soft power, often used in contrast to 'hard power', is the ability to influence the behaviour of other people. It is also considered the 'second face of power' that indirectly allows you to obtain the outcomes you want. A country's soft power, according to Nye (2004, 39), rests on three resources: "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)".

Toneri gave the example of olive oil and explained how a commercial video he took care of has been fundamental to increase its commercialisation in Japan during the 1990s. However, in the last few years, olive oil in Japan is no longer exclusively of Italian origins: many olive oils from other origins have increased their presence in the Japanese market. This reflects how the attitude towards Italian food has changed in the last few years.

### 3 Food+ Diplomacy

In the context of Italian exports to Japan, Giorgio Starace, Ambassador of Italy to Japan remarked that Japan represents an important market for Italian companies in the agri-food sector, particularly following the tariff liberalisation and thanks to the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), in force from the 1st of February 2019. Thanks to this agreement, Italian exports to Japan have increased by 20% in the same year (ISTAT, 2019). Among them, exports in the agri-food sector increased by 11.8% and Italy stands out for the greatest utilisation of the agreement compared to the other EU member states. Ambassador Starace has also given an overview of the promotional events organised by the Embassy of Italy to Japan, with the aim of intensifying the promotion of Italian agri-food products. Together with the promotion of the Mediterranean diet and IGP products, the Embassy of Italy to Japan is involved in the organisation of events and gatherings (Italian Cuisine Week, Aperitivo all'Italiana, etc.), alongside webinars and specific seminars targeted at international stakeholders. Italian agri-food, along with fashion products are very popular in Japan because they reflect the cultural identity of the territory and are characterised by a sustainable use of environmental resources. Despite the crisis due to COVID-19, the entire Italian productive system proved to be very resilient and prepared to catch any economic opportunities in the post-pandemic phase. In this context, as Ambassador Starace pointed out, the Italian Embassy to Japan has participated in Foodex 2021, the greatest food exhibition in Asia, with a pavilion of 1,200 square meters with more than 100 companies taking part in it and it resonated with great satisfaction with the Japanese buyers. Furthermore, the pandemic has caused a significant decrease of both Italian exports to Japan and Japanese exports to Italy, nonetheless Italy is still the second EU supplier to Japan, after Germany and ahead of France in 2021 (Ministry of Finance), and agro-food sector has decreased less than other sectors of export to Japan (pasta +21%); chocolate-based products (+7.5%), tomato sauces (+7.3%). All these efforts are aimed at building a solid partnership between the two countries in order to ensure a steady cultural, political and economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## 4 Food+ New Challenges

Emiko Kumano, PR from Nihonshu Ouendan, has provided an overview of Japanese *sake* exports and introduced the activity of Nihonshu Ouendan, who started its activities as a volunteer association. Due to the progressive ageing of *sake* craftsmen, small local producers are at high risk. For this reason, Nihonshu Ouendan decided to support them and involve them in new challenges in order to ensure continuation and preserve small *sake* breweries.

Even though compared to other countries' wine export it is still in an expanding phase, Japanese *sake* exports have actually tripled in the last ten years. Nihonshu Ouendan is now working on the production and branding of 6 different breweries from 6 prefectures in Japan in order to launch them in the international market (USA, Hong Kong, China, Singapore, UK, Malaysia and Vietnam). In doing this, they are working to keep the traditional delicacy resulting from small scale productions in order to ensure a high-quality unique product to be commercialised.

## 5 Food+ Design

George Amano, of George Creative Company, explained to us how design is deeply related to the market response of a certain product and how important it could be, especially in the food business. Appearance is fundamental in Italy as well as in Japan, especially in the food market and design can be decisive in the success of a certain product. Through examples from his own productions, he has analysed how design can have an impact on the sales and revenues of a certain product. As an example, he produced a new design for a Tropicana juice package, omitting the image of an orange pierced by a straw. This resulted in a sales decrease of more than 50% than before and even though substance is the same, demonstrating how packaging design can be of fundamental importance.

Furthermore, George Amano highlighted how the usage of technology can bring relevant innovations to the food design industry, not only allowing people from different parts of the world to have access to the same products, but also bringing significant strikes in terms of sustainability.

## 6 Food+ Trade

Eiko Koga and Natalia Sinatra, from Mitsubishi Italy S.p.a., introduced the role of *sōgō shōsha* (globally integrated business enterprise), literally 'general business enterprise' operating between Italy and Japan and their food business.

Mitsubishi Corporation operates in several different fields (machinery, automotive, cosmetics, infrastructure, food, healthcare, etc.) and even though originally its function was mainly logistics and finance, it has evolved through the decades and became a dynamic business in both trade (raw materials, manufacturers, distributors, retailer) and business management between these phases, optimising a new supply chain management.

The Food & Beverage division offers support to Italian producers and to Japanese clients and the product portfolio covers the majority of the most internationally known Italian specialities (olive oil, cheese, wine, and frozen products).

Mitsubishi Italy S.p.a. offers trading support services (logistics, translations, business follow up) and operates weekly economic and political analysis, market research, trend analysis and business development, in order to update clients' knowledge of a specific market. In doing this, they keep a focus on sustainability and circular economy with this value chain being the ultimate goal of this company.

A *sōgō shōsha* is also a cultural mediator and Mitsubishi Italy S.p.a. mediates between the culture of Italian producers and the necessities of Japanese clients, in order to share appropriate knowledge between the two markets.

After the EU-Japan Partnership agreement started in 2019, exports in the agri-food sector increased by 80% and this is considered as a starting point of a new era for the economic relations between EU and Japan.

Made in Italy products in Japan have always been appreciated by Japanese consumers and the market trends made possible the distinction between 3 different categories of Japanese consumers: traditionalists (48% of consumers with no propensity in purchasing novelty food), Millennials (36% of consumers, age 18~38, curious and open to the latest trends) and globetrotters (10% of the population, age 39~54, high spending power, demanding, sophisticated consumers really attentive to product quality).

Mitsubishi Italy has provided an overview of some different products in Japan, highlighting the share percentage for Italian products. As expected, Italy dominates the pasta market (75%), even though the most influential brand is De Niro (39%), almost unknown in Italy because it focuses on export instead of domestic market share. The olive oil market is also dominated by Italian products (67% market share) which is a remarkable percentage.

In conclusion, the answer that Natalia Sinatra, Mitsubishi Italy S.p.a. would give to the question: "what do Japanese customers look for when buying Italian products? What is the added value of Italian products?" is: "its relationship to Italian culture and the idea of enjoyment and fashion it brings with it".

Italian products are strictly linked to, and consequently branded in relation to, Italian culture and passion for the production of food products and this part of their added value.

## 7 Food + Investments and Trends

As Taketoshi Obata (MUFG, JCCI) highlighted, the JCCI (Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Italy) was established in 1973 with the purpose of promoting economic ties between Italy and Japan. The total volume of Foreign Direct Investments from Japan to Italy has been on the increase in recent years and Japan is ranked in second position, next only to the USA, among non-EU countries. Acquisition of local companies by Japanese corporations is another aspect of the investments from Japan to Italy, and southern Europe, including Italy, has a small portion. However, Italy always places as one of the top ten countries among EMEA countries (Europe, Middle East, Africa), except for 2020. According to MUFG statistics there are nearly 260 Japanese companies doing business in Italy and the top five industries include machinery, automobiles, electronics, apparel and trading. More than 60% of Japanese companies operating in Italy are located in Lombardy. So far, the number of Japanese companies in the food industry is still limited and the following three examples are to summarise the situation involving them:

1. Company J: a trading arm of a Japanese food-products manufacture, it promotes sales of Japanese food products and operates Japanese rice fields in Italy;
2. Company V: produces tomato and zucchini and exports frozen vegetables to Japan;
3. Company Y: produces beverage products in the Netherlands and sales in Italy;
4. Company S: operates a Japanese restaurant chain Italy

On this topic, Kentaro Ide, Director General of the Jetro office in Milan, introduced the general trends regarding food in the Italian and Japanese contexts.

In 2019, the import of agricultural products and food from Italy registered as 10.7% of the total import. On the other hand, for Japan it occupies only 0.5% of the total amount of import from Japan and if we compare the portion of import in each country to the whole amount from the world, we can calculate that the Japanese import of Italian food is 80 times higher than Italian import from Japan. In Japan, the boom of Italian cuisine occurred during the 1980s. Italian cuisine is widely accepted as daily food and this situation is reflected in the actual amount of imports of Italian foodstuff.

On the contrary, in Italy there were just a few Japanese restaurants in the 1990s and the main customers frequenting them were Japanese people living in Italy. Later on, a lot of *sushi* restaurants owned by non-Japanese people started to open in Italy and were cheaper compared to Italian restaurants. The situation changed in 2015 after the significant success of the Japanese Pavilion at EXPO Milano which gave the opportunity for young Italian people to know about Japanese cuisine directly, and it can be considered as a launch point of the boom of Japanese cuisine in Italy. The history of the development of Italian cuisine in Japan started almost thirty years ago, while Japanese cuisine started to become diffused in Italy only six years ago. This has to be taken into consideration when exploring the differences in the amount of export of foodstuff between the two countries and, as Ide Kentaro highlights, Japanese exports to Italy have just begun. Another important issue to be taken into consideration is the difference of import standards between the EU and Japan that make it very difficult for small and medium sized firms to adapt to them. As an example, the quality of *sushi* in Italy is improving, but still there are less varieties of fish compared to Japan. Importing some kind of fish from Japan is a solution, but by exporting some fish to the EU the processing facility in Japan has to adapt to EU standards and they have to get authorisation from the EU authority. Also, in Japan there is a big use of natural colorants when making traditional food, but these are not accepted in the EU. They would then have to remove that colour and re-configure it to export to the EU. The Cost to gain these authorisations and the operational changes required is extremely high and for these reasons it is not easy for small enterprises to enter the European market. These and other elements are to be considered as the background in which food cultures spread between EU countries and Japan and are subject to continuous changes and reinterpretations between the country of origin and the destination country.

In conclusion, as Ide Kentaro pointed out, the interaction of two cultures has been widened and deepened by the diffusion of food and those phenomena are to be considered as a proof of the connection between cultures.

## 8 Food + Sustainability

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about an essential gap between the actual and the pre-pandemic global food system. For the foreseeable future, scenarios of the international food market, with a specific focus on Made in Italy and Japanese products, have been outlined in light of the pandemic's impact by the panel of Michele Bianco, Manager of Ubercom Treviso. According to his speech on the role of

global sustainability, a subject on which the speeches of Francesco Bicciato and Nanako Yamamori also touched, is finally seen as an element of innovation and driving force for the F&B strategy, building the reputation and transparency of the companies of the food sector that choose to find sustainable solutions. New solutions of sustainable packaging drove the evolution of the Italian market in 2020 and highlight the consciousness of the consumers who wish to be part of a green global perception, and pointing out that the 'free from' formula (free from nickel, allergens, plastic, phosphate; and also: veggie, recycled, biodegradable, green...) is now considered a plus by the purchaser. Furthermore, both in Japan and in Italy, and especially within the pandemic scenario, there is a renovated rediscovery of tradition through a geography of taste, suggesting that local and regionally typical authentic food are becoming more and more desired by consumers. As observed by Michihata Fumi and Chieko Nakabasami, the pandemic gave the chance to rebuilt families and communities offering an opportunity to think about sustainability: being forced to stay at home, people seem to have realised the over-consumption of urban life, and the revitalisation of neighbours under a new light of global environment's consciousness.

Francesco Bicciato, Secretary General of Italian Sustainable Investment Forum (ItaSIF), explained the role of sustainable finance strategies to promote the agri-food industry, providing an overview on the ItaSIF, a no-profit organisation founded in 2001 and based on the concept of sustainable finance with regards to the environmental and social impact of financial activity, born with the aim to encourage the integration of environmental, social and governance criteria into financial products and processes. ItaSIF in particular is a founding member of Eurosif, a pan-European network whose mission is to develop sustainability through European Financial Markets, deepening the impact and visibility of sustainable investment organisations at the global level. In his panel Bicciato pointed out strategies, such as the selection of impact investing, the exclusion of activity against the environment and the violation of human rights, and suggested advantages and barriers of sustainable and responsible investment (SRI). The advantage of the investment includes the management of ESG risks, investment opportunities and returns, whereas the barriers to the investment depend in particular on prejudice, lack of harmonisation and lack of data. In short, part of the new revolutionary development is based on the promotion of the sustainable sector and culture as investments and not as a cost. Talking about the reaction of finance to the COVID-19 pandemic, Bicciato highlighted that the performance of ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance activities in sustainable investment) was better in terms of return of investment compared to a non-pandemic situation, saying that finance cannot act in efficient way without considering the orientation of cap-



ital toward sustainable investment. Among all the sectors, sustainable agriculture is one of the most strategic sectors in European Union, and Italy occupies the third place for agri-food production value, and first place among European levels for food security. Even climate change, agriculture and forestry can give an important contribution, having a crucial role at global level. In conclusion, according to Biciato, the instruments that Sustainable Investment already have include the Green Bond, Social Bond, Impact investing and European Investment Bank. Finance has, in the end, a multi stakeholder responsibility concerning social and cultural development, especially in facing climate change and a health pandemic crisis; moreover, he drew attention to the importance of culture improvement for global movements of sustainability in order to set up new forms of cooperation.

Nanako Yamamori, Journalist for The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan, held a panel called "Current Affairs of Japanese Food", analysing how the Japanese attitude has been changing since the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. According to Yamamori, the disaster had an enormous impact on the agriculture and fishing industry of the region and required more reassurance of transparency for what concerns food's safety. In fact, right after the calamity, there was not enough food and energy because factories and farms producing vegetables and fishery products for the domestic market were physically destroyed, and the transport system and logistics were not functioning. There was also a rising concern for food safety, especially because soil and water were contaminated, and basically there were no customers willing to buy food from farmers coming from the hit region. After ten years the industry had recovered, but the market changed in a way that people continue to require transparency in food processes, and provenience of the food declared in the labels. Furthermore, the Olympic Games of 2020 (2021) put Japan into the international spotlight, forcing the country to adapt with regards to both discrimination issues and food business, since the need to meet conform to international standards. As of three years ago, only 4% of Japanese production matched the Global G.A.P. standard, and Japan lacked behind in terms of numbers of vegetarian, vegan and *halal* restaurants; for this reason the Government has actually increased public education in order to prepare the country to receive athletics and tourists. The other issue pointed out by Yamamori concerns a series of current social and political trends regarding the sustainability of food production and the necessity to reduce food waste in Japan. Food loss in Japan is over 6.5 tons every year, more than a half of which would be considered edible, and equal to the total rice produced domestically. To reduce it, some start-up businesses created online systems in order to directly connect consumers, producers and restaurants through apps, avoiding waste of food due to overproduction or expiring dates. In conclusion, reducing food loss, plastic

bags, packaging, disposable plates and cutlery is a huge challenge. The pandemic crisis changed some people's attitudes, and shocked every level of the food chain, from supplies, to restaurants to consumers, forcing people to be flexible and to find new ways of communication and to sell food.

## 9 Food + Arts and Media

The cultural bridge that Japanese food culture and Italian food culture have built together with economic and finance strategies can clearly be seen through the arts and media, as the poster of the Symposium suggests, with the Japanese actor Toshirō Mifune eating *ramen*, and the Italian actor Alberto Sordi eating *spaghetti*. In the last decade, as Paola Scrolavezza pointed out during her speech, the number of TV series, TV shows, documentaries, movies and *manga* dedicated to Japanese food and distributed worldwide has gradually increased. Examples such as *Washoku - Beyond Sushi* (2015), *Shin'ya Shokudō* (Midnight Diner - Tokyo Stories, ended in 2019), *Nobushi no gurume* (Samurai Gourmet 2017), *Saboriman Kantarō* (Kantarō the Sweet Tooth Salaryman, 2017) are just a few. From an Italian point of view, Japanese food culture has been unconsciously integrated through the screen thanks to *anime* and movies that incorporate common knowledge foods like *ramen* (e.g. in *Ponyo on the Cliff by the sea*, 2008), *onigiri* (e.g. in *Pokémon*, 1997-present) *dorayaki* (e.g. in *Doraemon*, 2005) and *bento* boxes (e.g. in *Sailor Moon*, 1992-97). On the other hand, it is not difficult to prove that Italian culinary culture influenced *manga* and *anime* in Japan, as we can see in the *manga* *Kukkingu Papa* (*Cooking Papa*, 1984-present) with the comic page reporting the historic Pizzeria da Michele in Naples. The similarities of food narrative strategies in Italian and Japanese cinema have been underlined by Roberta Novielli's research about "Food Between Life and Death in the Cinema of Marco Ferreri and Itami Juzo", in which *La Grande Bouffe* (1973) and *Tampopo* (*Tanpopo*, 1985), two fundamental films in the history of international cinema, are compared through an examination of the critique of the contemporary consumerist and materialist society, the body (physical, social, political), the excess and voracity of consumption and the aesthetic of cruelty that crosses all the narrative with grotesque tones, highlighting how cooking and eating became an ancestral ritual representing a system of communication and a body of image. Japanese relationships with food and tradition through the cinema has been discussed by Eugenio De Angelis, who, analysing the dining scenes of three films, underlined the fact that, even if street food is far more popular in East Asia than in Europe, home is still the main place to consume food, and cinema has become a useful case study of the representation of the Japanese

family dynamics. As the anthropologist Giovanni Bulian observed, the desire to remember home through food consumption enables the construction of ethnic identities, cultural boundaries and a sense of uniqueness: Japanese food and home cooking constitute a strong link to the domestic environment in connection with the primary need of nutrition. The power of *washoku*, inscribed in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list from 2013, lies in its direct embodiment of use value, and with its international promotion it undeniably establishes a link with the global food market. Moreover, performing arts such as music, poetry and dance, as Bonaventura Ruperti pointed out, are also important in the rituals dedicated to the divinities and to the entire audience on the occasion of rites and festival: food and drink, which are basis of civilisation and nutrition in Japan are connected with the traditional theatres, from *nō*, to *kyōgen*.

Nowadays Japanese food culture is spreading all over the world, becoming popular in Italy not just because of *sushi*, but also through *ramen*, *onigiri*, *tonkatsu*, *mochi*, curry rice, tea ceremony workshops, and so on. As the journalist and writer Stefania Viti illustrated in her panel on the project of creation, development and publication of a series of books on Japanese food culture within the Italian publishing scene, the gastronomic tale is increasing its importance both as a process of business strategy for the companies, and of course as interest and acculturation requested by the Italian market towards Japanese food and cuisine. A gastronomic tale, or storytelling, that at present cannot disregard the massive usage of social media – especially during the COVID-19 pandemic – as a way of business promotion and knowledge sharing: compared to ten years ago it is now easier to bump into Japanese food culture because of the extreme popularity of it through social media. Instagram is currently on the top list of social media used in Japan, after Hootsuite and We Are Social (Solito, Rinarelli 2020), and the hashtag '*sushi*', in March 2021, shows up in more than 29 million feeds as pictures, IG stories and videos (Bugajski 2021). Following the same trend, Instagram profiles dedicated to Japan and Japanese food are growing in popularity and followers. Similarly, Italian food culture is becoming more and more popular in Japan, as we can see from the increasing interest in products such as wine, olive oil, coffee, *pizza*, Italian cheese and *panettone*.

## 10 Conclusions

*Venice/Japan International Food+ Symposium* at Ca' Foscari University of Venice has been a fruitful and constructive conference that saw the international participation of authorities, managers, experts, journalists and scholars exchanging knowledge about food and diplomacy, new challenges, design, trade, investments, sustainability, me-

dia and arts, and combining several disciplines in a comparative approach. Different implications of food's cultural representation have been discussed, providing an extremely accurate overview of the past and the present relationship between Italy and Japan onto this meaningful and symbolic theme.

The main aim of the Symposium was to explore different perspectives on food in the particular context of cultural-economic relations between Japan and Italy, and to create links of knowledge within a multidisciplinary and international field. Several themes, such as 'food and tradition', 'food and import/export', 'food and sustainability', 'food and communication', 'food and new technologies' and 'food and arts', all connected in a socio-economic and cultural context, were examined. Food culture has been taken into consideration by 23 experts of the most varied thematic areas during the three different days, exploring the value and the connection of food culture seen from different but connected perspectives, from the intellectual to the diplomatic, to the ones directly linked to business and enterprises, and providing a constructive information sharing within the participants.

This conference, that included Italian food culture perception, food trading companies in Japan, branding differences between the two countries, sustainable finance strategies to promote the agri-food industry, food culture as represented in cinema, traditional performing arts, design, and anthropology in both the Italian and Japanese contexts, is part of a major project that will embrace future face-to-face appointments with operators of the sector and entrepreneurs, in a positive and fulfilling cooperation.