

Kosher for Everyone

Natasha Lardera (July 15, 2011)



New opportunities and challenges for Italian food products in a ever growing market were explored at a seminar held at the Italian Embassy and hosted by Italian Ministry of Economic Development and the Italian Trade Commission during the 57th edition of the Summer Fancy Food Show

“Kosher for Everyone: Growth Opportunities and Challenges for Sales of Italian Specialty Foods in the U.S. Ethnic Market” was a seminar held in conjunction with the 57th international Summer Fancy Food Show at the Embassy of Italy hosted by the Italian Ministry of Economic Development and the Italian Trade Commission (ITC) where growth opportunities and challenges for the sale of Kosher Italian food in the United States were discussed.

“‘Kosher for Everyone’ is designed to educate Italian producers about the economic benefits of obtaining kosher certification for their gourmet food and beverages and to encourage American customers to import more kosher Italian products to meet demand that is growing by as much as 15 percent annually,” Aniello Musella, Trade Commissioner and Executive Director for the United States

of ITC said when introducing the event.

"Italy has a strong culinary tradition based on Jewish recipes," Ambassador Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata added, "Cities like Rome, Venice, Florence and Ferrara, for example, have a strong Jewish presence. Roman Jewery has been in existence for over 2000 years without interruption and the cultural, and culinary impact, has been intense." (Think of Carciofi alla Giudia, deep fried artichokes that originated in Rome's Jewish ghetto and are now served all over the country).

Three experts on the market for kosher products and the Italian food market, Donato Grosser, president of D. Grosser and Associates, Ltd. Marketing & Management Consultants, Rabbi Umberto Piperno and Thomas Gellert, of Gellert Global Group, moderated by gourmet food, wine, and travel writer and radio commentator Fred Plotkin, discussed kosher food, whose consumption is becoming one of the hottest trends in the United States. They also explained how Italian producers and importers of Italian gourmet specialties can take advantage of the robust demand for a product not limited to one ethnic group.

Donato Grosser, spoke about the market for kosher products in the United States, where Jews, Muslims, Seventh Day Adventists, consumers with dietary restrictions, vegans, vegetarians, Hindus, and healthy eating devotees are fueling purchases of kosher products. "Kosher food is prepared following biblical laws," Grosser writes in his presentation to the event, "with five million Jewish consumers, the United States is the second largest kosher food market in the world after the State of Israel. The kosher food segment is extensive. In addition to orthodox Jews, who eat only kosher products, more than 80% of consumers who shop for kosher food are Muslims, and Seventh Day Adventists; consumers with dietary restrictions (such as people who are allergic to lactose and shellfish, and gluten intolerant); vegans, vegetarians and Hindus; and consumers who believe kosher food is healthier and safer because the certification guarantees the ingredients listed on the label. The kosher food market is estimated at \$13 billion, including products purchased specifically for their certification. The kosher segment of the U.S. Food market has grown at a much faster pace than the rest of the market – as high as 15% annually according to some estimates. This rate parallels the growth of organic food."

According to the additional data presented by Grosser at the event obtained from a recent study published by the orthodox Union, "about 15% of all kosher consumers buy kosher-certified foods all the time; 58% buy kosher occasionally; 55% buy kosher because they believe kosher food products are safer and healthier; 38% buy kosher because they are vegetarian; 24% buy kosher because they want dairy free products; and 16% of consumers buy kosher because they want a substitute for halal products that are available in their area."

Rabbi Umberto Piperno, a kosher food expert, analyzed the technical aspects of kosher production, drawing upon his educational studies and vast experience, which includes coordinating Star K hashgachot (kosher certifications) in Italy. Rabbi Piperno carefully explained how "the Torah prohibits the consumption of certain foods such as blood, worms, insects, shellfish, fish without scales and fins, certain animals considered rapacious, and animals that do not meet the necessary requirement of cleanliness and therefore were deemed not suitable for offerings to God. For this reason not even the smallest trace of these products can be consumed." Kosher animals like cows, sheep and goats must be ritually slaughtered and the meat must be washed and salted to make sure there is no blood left, while swine and hare are not allowed. "Milk and dairy must not have any contact with meat. Otherwise they may not be eaten. The supervisor must keep the dairy products under surveillance after milking until completion of the production of foods, such as cheeses that require a kosher rennet."

Thomas Gellert, a principal of the family owned Gellert Global Group, whose diversified businesses include international food importing, specialty packaging, and restaurant management, discussed his experience with kosher and Italian products, and explained how at the moment they import over 2500 Italian cheeses but none of them is kosher. According to the Gellert PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) regulations are so strict that they make it impossible to produce a different product.

The purpose of these laws is "to protect the reputation of the regional foods, promote rural and



agricultural activity, help producers obtain a premium price for their authentic products, and eliminate the unfair competition and misleading of consumers by non-genuine products, which may be of inferior quality or of different flavor.” Producers interested in kosher will have to think of alternatives (as they did with meats – indeed duck prosciutto has substituted pork prosciutto) in order to make kosher cheeses, “In Sardina, for example, there are cheeses that are still made with a vegetarian rennet – such as artichokes and chard, Rabbi Piperno explained.

There always are solutions, and the investment is worth it. The Chinese, for example, already have a thousand companies producing kosher products as the market is really a goldmine. If a culture so foreign to Jewish culture can do it, why can't we?

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