

DOCTORAATSONDERZOEK - DOCTORATS

OLIVIER DE MARET

Italian Food Businesses and the Construction of Italianness in Late-Nineteenth-Century Brussels : Enterprises, Migrants and Meanings

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This study focuses on the public foodways of Italian migrants in Brussels as an innovative way of exploring how identities were constructed and community cohesion articulated at the end of the long nineteenth century. It fills a gap in the historiography on Italian migration in Belgium by further providing a detailed study of the Italian population in the city of Brussels and the municipality of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode between 1876 and 1914. Overall, it builds upon current historiographical trends that deal with the relations between food, migration, and identity. In the long-term undertaking that is socio-cultural adaptation, migrants employ the business of food not only to prosper economically but also for purposes of self-representation and cultural reproduction. By focusing on all types of food businesses, their names, the products they sold, the people who operated them, and the advertisements they produced, this study describes and analyzes the ways in which Italians commercialized Italian food and constructed images of Italianness.

Throughout the dissertation, four questions are addressed : To what extent did Italian migrants develop foodways specific to their Brussels experiences? What types of Italianness did Italian food businesses construct? How important were Italian food businesses among Italian migrants and other foreigners? How does the Brussels case relate to other

cities to which Italians migrated? In order to answer these questions, mixed methods – which involve quantitative analysis (i.e. descriptive statistics) and qualitative analysis (i.e. close reading techniques) – are applied to the following primary sources : Italian registration files held by the Foreigners’ Office and Applications to open a drinking place in the city of Brussels, Foreigners’ Registers in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode communal archives, Brussels’s business directories (i.e. the *Annuaire du commerce et de l’industrie*), six Italian newspapers published in Brussels, and five photographs of ice cream peddlers.

Chapter 1 frames the research. Chapter 2 presents the basic historical context and analyzes the place of foreigners and Italians in the Brussels conurbation. Chapter 3 details the three main types of Italian food businesses: catering activities (i.e. bars, cafés, restaurants, and wine rooms), shopkeeping activities (i.e. retailers, wholesalers, small factories, and wine rooms), and peddling activities (i.e. ice cream). Chapter 4 surveys the migrants involved in the four most important food-related occupations associated with these types of businesses, i.e. waiters, peddlers, caterers, and shopkeepers. Chapter 5 contextualizes the findings by looking at how Italian migrants adapted food, businesses, and practices in Brussels, and how they constructed Italian identities around them. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes by arguing in favor of the innovative forces and creative powers of migrants.

Moreover, this dissertation shows that Italian food entrepreneurs were quasi omnipresent and highly visible in the Brussels public foodscape. They established diversified activities aimed at all social categories and strategically located in the city’s Italian

neighborhoods and focal points of eating, shopping, and relaxing. The results point toward the birth of the first developed and truly exotic culinary fashion in Brussels. Italians articulated this entrepreneurial and culinary innovation through the introduction of novel foods, which were often familiar foods commercialized with a new label. They offered mostly canned foods, pasta, wine, olive oil, fruits, vegetables, cheese, cold cuts, ice cream, eggs, and poultry, which were sold by Italians in Italian establishments, and were promoted generally as from Italy (i.e. *d'Italie*) but increasingly as Italian (i.e. *italiens*). As corollary to the commercialization of these novel foods, Italian food entrepreneurs developed innovative commercial practices. Because the overall group of Italian migrants in Brussels was relatively small and economically modest, food entrepreneurs could not rely solely on Italian customers. In order to broaden the appeal of their businesses, they sought to attract non-Italian customers by advertising in French, which was the language spoken by the Belgian elite as well as the language of gastronomy. Moreover, Italian food entrepreneurs created a specific *bruxellois* Italianness constructed around references to an Italian nation of cities and regions, the French-speaking features of the Brussels foodscape, and notions of genuineness, quality, luxury, middle-classness, exoticism, and cosmopolitanism.