

A slice of history for Italian cuisine

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Dishes including pizza and tiramisu have won world heritage status, to Giorgia Meloni's delight, writes Tom Kington

Patriots the world over gather round their flag, sing their anthem and cheer their football team to express national pride, but for Italians tucking into fresh mozzarella or a steaming plate of risotto is enough to stir the spirit.

Which is why Giorgia Meloni's government was bursting with patriotic fervour as Unesco yesterday added Italian cooking to its list of "intangible" world heritage in recognition of the merits of pizza, salami, tiramisu and hundreds of other specialities that make up the country's cuisine.

"For Italians our cooking is not just food or a collection of recipes, but much more — it is culture, tradition, work and wealth," Meloni said in a video after the listing was announced.

The prime minister, who has made Italian food a cornerstone of her brand of national identity politics, added: "Today we celebrate a victory for Italy: the victory of an extraordinary nation which has no rivals and can amaze the world when it believes in itself and understands what it is capable of."

Individual foods such as the French baguette and Naples pizza have previously been listed, as has the French tradition of gathering for good meals, but Italian campaigners said it was the first time a country's entire cuisine was honoured.

Unesco said it was recognising "the use of raw materials and artisanal food preparation techniques" in Italian cooking. "It is a communal activity that emphasises intimacy with food, respect for ingredi-

ents, and shared moments around the table," it added.

Massimo Bottura, whose Osteria Francescana in Modena has previously been voted the world's best restaurant, said: "Italian food is unique — it is not only different dishes and recipes but a rite of love, a language made of gestures, smells and

tastes which keeps an entire country united. Italy is Italy around a table where you share dreams, argue and make peace and pass on memories."

Italian cuisine stretches from polenta and sausage in the north to French-influenced baba dessert in Naples and Sicilian ricotta stuffed cannoli.

In the Unesco application, Italy's agriculture minister Francesco Lollobrigida called it "a puzzle: each of us holds a piece of it, a unique way of interpreting cooking, their own recipe, their own dish".

Meloni said the Unesco listing would help Italy defend itself from purveyors of "Italian sounding" food around the world. Italian producers have claimed products such as Minnesota mozzarella and Belgian carbonara sauce cost them €120 billion in market share every year. Italy's Unesco campaign team expect the decision to encourage an extra 18 million visitors in the next two years.

Habits are, however, changing. In Naples, the home of pizza, children are increasingly demanding chips on their margheritas, to the shock of purists.

The food historian Alberto Grandi claimed the listing promoted an image of Italian eating which no longer exists.

"This is not who we are but how others see us. Italians eat in the office and in the street rather than under pergolas on checked table cloths, and we are Europe's biggest consumers of sushi," he said.

