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For a new geography of taste: the diffusion of Basmati rice in Italy

1. - Basmati “queen of fragrance”
Basmati (commonly translated as “queen of fragrance”) is a slender, aromatic long-grain rice belonging to the species known as Oryza Sativa Indica. It is a high quality aromatic rice characterised by a distinct fragrance of sandalwood and nuts, a delicate texture and sharp points.

It was known as early as in 1900 BC as a highly prized long-grained rice cultivated near Jaipur in the State of Rajasthan, India. The tradition states that Basmati rice varieties were brought to the Dehra Dun Himalayan Valley (in the State of Uttarakhand) by Dost Mohamad, Amir of Afghanistan when he was exiled there by the British in 1840 after a defeat in battle (Achaya, 1998, p. 209) even though it had been known for centuries in other areas of North India. The first recorded use of the word “Basmati” for the fragrant long grain rice is in a poem, Heer Ranha, written by Waris Shah in Punjab in 1766 (Shobha Rani and Krishnaiah, 2001, p. 50). For hundreds of years Basmati rice has been grown on the foothills of the Himalayas, in the valleys of Punjab a region now split between India and Pakistan. Subsequently its cultivation has spread to other parts of India and Pakistan especially concentrated (in the following order) in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and Jammu in India and in Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan in Pakistan. The total area planted to Basmati varies from year to year, swinging from 0.7 to 1 million ha each for both India and Pakistan (Khush and dela Cruz, 2001, p. 15-16; Shobha Rani and Krishnaiah, 2001, p. 53; Subbaiah, Singh, Kumar and Krishnaiah, 2001, p. 111; Mann and Ashraf, 2001, p. 129).

According to the particular area in which it is cultivated, Basmati rice it is sown in the period that goes from May 20th to June 20th and it is transplanted one month later in fields prepared with 3-4 double ploughings and a slight flood. The water depth at the time of transplanting is low (1-1 and 1/2 inches) and it is kept so for about a week. Thereafter it is gradually increased to approximately 3 inches (water depth higher than 4 inches affects tillering). About 25-30 days after transplanting, the field is allowed to dry for 5-6 days and then re-flooded. Watering is stopped after grain formation is completed, to allow the crop and the field to dry for harvesting. The harvest is done after about 30 to 35 days after the 50% of the flowering (Rice Research Institute Kala Shah Kaku, 2005; Subbaiah, Singh, Kumar and Krishnaiah, 2001, pp. 111-114).

1.1 - Characteristics of Basmati rice
The term Basmati is used to designate certain aromatic rice varieties grown in the north of India and in Pakistan (it is therefore a geographical indicator). These varieties have a prescribed range of characteristics:

- Length: the grain should be longer than 6.5 mm
- Length-to-width ratio: it needs to be over 3.0 (generally is about 3.5-3.7).
- Colour: it should be translucent and creamy white.
- Characteristics upon cooking: firm and tender texture with no splitting and extreme elongation (Khush and dela Cruz, 2001, p. 15; Shobha Rani and Krishnaiah, 2001, p. 52).
Traditional varieties were limited to few daylength-sensitive, tall varieties that have good quality grains, but low yields (Basmati doesn’t respond well to elevated doses of fertiliser and it is strongly affected by pests). In general the yield in farmers fields (as opposed to experimental ones in which a higher yield has been obtained) is around 2t/ha (Khush and dela Cruz, 2001, p. 15). In the last few decades the Green Revolution, that has deeply affected rice production world wide, has also touched the ancient Basmati. After the introduction in the 1960s of high-yielding variety of rice such as IR 8 and TN1, breeding programs were initiated to produce high-yielding varieties of Basmati. The traditional varieties were crossed with other rice genotypes to produce hybrid Basmati varieties with better agronomic characters, but with a wide range of quality in terms of aroma, elongation on cooking and eating quality (Centre for Arid Zone Studies, 2005).

Fig. 1 and 2- Basmati plant and Basmati rice

Source: Centre for Arid Zone Studies, University of Wales, 2005.

There is much disagreement about which varieties should be regarded as Basmati. Some argue that only traditional varieties are worthy of the designation “true” or “pure” Basmati, while others would include the better quality basmati hybrids. Dr. V. P. Singh of IARI (Indian Agricultural Research Institute) writes that 86 varieties have been classified as Basmati, even though only 18 of them qualify under the strict Basmati standard cited above (Singh, 2000). The Food Standards Agency of United Kingdom1 currently recognises 15 varieties that can be called Basmati2. Rice breeders

1 As they themselves state: “The Food Standards Agency is an independent food safety watchdog set up by an Act of Parliament in 2000 to protect the public's health and consumer interests in relation to food (www.food.gov.uk).
2 “The following varieties have been approved by the Indian and Pakistani authorities and can use the description "Basmati". They all have at least one parent which is a true-line Basmati variety, and they have been approved on the basis of having the above unique properties as
continue to produce new varieties, some of which may have characters equal to or
together than currently approved hybrid Basmati varieties. The last variety of Basmati
introduced in Indian Punjab (2000), known as Basmati 2000, it seems that it can
produce 5.5 t/ha, a thousand kilos more than the last modified variety, Super Basmati
introduced in 1996 (Rice Research Institute Kala Shah Kaku, 2005).

1.2 - Basmati economies in India and Pakistan
Basmati rice has become famous all over the world for its distinct aroma and texture
and rendered popular especially by Indian restaurants. Recently Basmati rice has
become one of the fastest growing export items from both producer States, India and
Pakistan. Basmati is mainly directed to the Middle East (Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE,
Iraq, Oman), Europe (United Kingdom, Russia, Germany, the Netherlands) and North
America (United States and Canada) (Khush and dela Cruz, 2001, p. 15). Although it
is a small part of India’s total rice exports (about 14%\(^3\)), it is high in value. According
to basmati.com, a web site that gives constantly up to dated Basmati market prices,
the price of the Indian Basmati in march 2005 was 850$ per ton versus non aromatic
rice varieties that swing between 238$ to 295$ per ton depending on the variety.

Fig. 3- Export of Basmati rice from India and Pakistan to the European Union in tons

![Export of Basmati rice from India and Pakistan to the European Union in tons](image)

Source: Ente Nazionale Risi, 2005

Recently Basmati rice started to be cultivated also in the United States like many
variety of rice originating from all over the world\(^4\). In late 1997 an American

measured by various objective tests such as grain dimension, amylose content, cooking
elongation, and aroma. Indian varieties: Basmati 370, Dehradun (Type - 3), Basmati 217,
Basmati 386, Taraori (Karnal Local, HBC-19), Ranbir Basmati (IET 11348), Pusa Basmati
(IET 10364), Punjab Basmati (Bauni Basmati), Haryana Basmati (HKR 228/IET 10367),
Kasturi (IET 8580), Mahi Suganda. Pakistani varieties: Basmati 370, Kernel (Basmati
Pakistan), Super Basmati, Basmati 385, Basmati 198” (www.food.gov.uk).

\(^3\) Percentage calculated on the data regarding the export of 1998-1999 Shobha Rani and
Krishnaiah, 2001, p. 57).

\(^4\) Looking at the list of varieties cultivated by the rice producing company in the US one can
find rice varieties like Baldo, Arborio, Jasmin and even Basmati. It is interesting to note
though that the American rice producers and retailers don’t seem particularly interested in
using the rice variety as a way of rice commercialisation like it happens in Italy. The USA
Rice Federation in the description of rice types available to American consumer utilises only
company, RiceTec Inc, was granted a patent\(^5\) by the US patent office to call their newly made\(^6\) variety of aromatic rice grown outside India and Pakistan with the name of 'Basmati'. This has triggered big reactions in India and internationally to have the patent cancelled on the ground of biopiracy but the question has not yet found a definite solution. RiceTec Inc, had been trying to enter the international Basmati market with brands like 'Kasmati' and 'Texmati' described as Basmati-type rice with minimal success\(^7\).

Fig. 4 and 5 - The Texmati rice and American Basmati produced in Missouri, USA.

2. - The diffusion of Basmati rice in Italy
After seducing the rest of the world Basmati rice started to attract Italians. At first it arrived on the menus of Indian restaurants that themselves are a new entry in the Italian foodscape. The first Indian restaurant in Milan, Sukrity (www.sukrity.com) opened in 1991 and according to the guide to the multiethic city published by the Comune di Roma, the first Indian restaurant in town did not open earlier than 15 year ago (Roma Multietnica, 2005). In the last few years the passion for Indian food, on the wave of a general indiamania, spread promptly. As a result Indian restaurant multiplied to reach the current number of 101 in the all of Italy\(^8\). This helped the diffusion of a broad oriental taste in a panorama of impenetrable Italian cuisine that in

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\(^5\) U.S. Patent No. 5,663,484 dated September 2, 1997 (Shiva, 2000).  
\(^6\) The Basmati variety for which RiceTec has claimed a patent, called Basmati 867, has been derived from 22 Indian Basmati varieties crossed with semi-dwarf varieties including Indica varieties (Shiva, 2000, RAFl, 2000).  
\(^7\) The United Kingdom's Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) recently performed a DNA analysis of basmati rice which concludes that RiceTec's two "Basmati" style products, Kasmati and Texmati, have a genetic profile with "much more similarity" to US long grain varieties than South Asian Basmati samples (RAFl, 2000).  
\(^8\) The have been traced by consulting the Yellow Pages and the White Pages for each Italian province and the web search engine "Google".
turn facilitate the knowledge and the consume of single food products (aromatic rice, masala tea, soy sauce, tofu ecc.). Basmati rice is one of the most interesting case of appropriation of a product that doesn’t belong to the Italian tradition and of its fusion with the prevalent taste of the Italian cuisine. Now, in Italy, Basmati rice is consumed, commercialised and even cultivated.

2.1 - Consuming Basmati in Italy

Basmati rice is a type of food with a strong cultural identity and linked with a specific imagery. Its distinctive aroma, slender shape and light texture, so different from the Italian rice varieties, immediately talks about Oriental landscapes and far away worlds, even though most of the time quite unlinked with the geographical provenience of the product.

It is a symbol of exoticism, refinement, gastronomic innovation and multiculturalism strongly associated with ethnic cuisine. It is always found on Indian menus in restaurants and cookbooks. Very often it is also placed, rather unconventionally, in recipes coming from other Asian gastronomic traditions (Indonesian, Thai and even Chinese).

At the moment Basmati rice is slowly leaving its ethnic connotation to enter the sphere of everyday cooking and high cuisine. It is now starting to make its appearance in Italian and continental menus to add a touch of exoticism to the meal. Perfectly Italian restaurants interested in creative cooking or in exploring new taste and combinations, place the aroma of Basmati rice near traditional Italian flavours. The Olivia restaurant in Milan, for example, includes in its menu Quail breast with Basmati, the trendy Asino cotto of Trastevere in Rome serves Tomato stuffed with Basmati rice and rocket, and the Cortacci of Mantova serves it cooked in the typical way of the Italian risotti enriched with a sauce made with Sardinian saffron or porcini mushrooms.

As shown, Basmati is starting to accompany and complement meat or vegetable dishes that are far from being Indian or Oriental and sometimes it is used in recipes previously made for varieties of rice that belong to the Italian tradition.

Cook books and food magazine now treat Basmati as an item belonging to our foodscape. It is included in the list when the different varieties of rice are described and countless are the advices for cooking the best Basmati or the recipes for Basmati rice available in Italian.

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9 In the popular imagery the Orient is something rather indistinct that evokes: “[...] romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscaped, remarkable experiences” (Said, 1979, p. 1).

10 Basmati rice is suggested in many recipes with an oriental taste even if they are not Indian. For example, in many versions (in Italian) of the Chinese Cantonese rice or Indonesian Nasi Goreng recipes it is suggested the use of Basmati rice.

11 It is interesting to note that even though the cookbooks that include Basmati rice in their recipes are in Italian and so available to the Italian public, none of those I consulted where written by Italians (Bay and Bay, 2004; Wilson, 2003; Feslikianian, 2003; Morningstar and Desai, 2004; Stacey, 2003). Italian cookbooks tend to mention the existence of Basmati Rice but do not include recipes for it (Petroni, 1998; Paolini e Vuga, 1999). The situation is different for magazines.
Italians in general do not consume a lot of rice especially in the South of Italy and in the Islands. The average is 5.5 kg per head per year (2000-2002) with regional variation that swing between 9.2 kg in the North West of Italy (the main production area of the Country) and 4.1 kg in the South and the Island (Molinari, 2003, p. 35). A typical every day Italian meal consist in a first course (know as primo) that could be a plate of pasta, of rice or a bowl of soup, a second course (secondo) that could be a dish of meat, fish, cheese or vegetables, accompanied by row or cooked vegetable (contorno), and concluded with fruit or a dessert (in special occasions it might be more elaborate and include more courses). A research carried out by Ente Nazionale Risi (a national organization that takes care of rice production and commercialisation) in 2001 to understand the attitude of Italian families toward rice consumption, showed that rice it is always considered a first course and not a staple dish to accompany meat, fish or vegetables like in most gastronomic tradition of the world. In this position (as a primo) rice has to face the incredibly steep competition with pasta and badly loses it (Ente Nazionale Risi, 2001). 

A recurrent reason given for not consuming rice regards the long time that it takes to cook. “Today consumers (in Italy) do not ask only for rice bombs, risotti, and sartù. They mainly ask for fast foods and dishes that can be quickly prepared at home or for exotic and multiethnic cuisine. The current market is open to rice varieties that can be prepared quickly and that do not overcook like parboiled or aromatic rice varieties like Basmati and Patna” (Paolini e Vuga, 1999, p. 133). People, especially in the young and working generation, have less time for cooking. So they want fast dishes that nevertheless are tasty and not disqualifying (Ente Nazionale Risi, 2001, p. 29). In this picture Basmati is conquering more and more a position in the diet of Italians. It is fast to cook, it is tasty and satisfy the desire for new, ethnic and trendy cuisine. It also has a status attached (“As a code food carries information regarding role, status, age, gender and order in the social hierarchy” Guigon, 2004, p. 14). It gives the consumer the possibility to be part of the cosmopolitan and cultural elite that knows and consumes products from other gastronomic traditions coming from far away and exotic countries:

I definitely feel there is something sophisticated about eating 'ethnic' foods. Doesn't it mark me as open-minded, progressive, and hip? [...]I have always thought it a testimony to my cosmopolitan nature that I am able to enjoy such diverse types of food (Diamond, 1995).

In absolute terms Basmati rice is known to a small part of the Italian population. The research carried out by Ente Nazionale Risi (2001) showed that Basmati is mainly known by people under 34 years old (2.6%). There is also a strong regional variation with the Centre of Italy in pole position (3.4%) followed by the North (0.6%) and the South (0.2%).

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12The reasons given to the researcher of Ente Nazionale Risi for not consuming rice where: not everyone in the family likes rice, pasta is preferred, it is expensive, it takes a long time to cook, it is associate to a low calorie diet or to illness (Ente Nazionale Risi, 2001, p. 95)

13Traditional Italian rice preparation that require a lot of work and time.

14It has to be noted that this data correspond to the spontaneous knowledge of varieties of rice. They are the outcome of the answer to the question: “Which rice varieties do you know?” and not to the question: “Do you know Basmati rice” (Ente Nazionale Risi, 2001, p. 73).
South together with the Islands with no knowledge at all. The knowledge of Basmati seems to be higher in towns with more than 100,000 inhabitants and decreases steadily in small towns. The smaller the town the least is the knowledge of it (Ente Nazionale Risi, 2001, pp. 73-74).

2.3 - Commercialisation

The increased consume of Basmati rice in Italy is mirrored by the rise in the import of Basmati from its countries of origin, India and Pakistan that has more than doubled in the last three years.

In the beginning Basmati rice could reach the Italian consumer mainly through two distribution channels: ethnic and health food stores. Ethnic stores sold imported Basmati loose, packed at the origin or if packed in Europe generally it would be in the United Kingdom15 (main brands being: Tilda, Rainham; Laila, Mayweld; Tohfa, London). Health store would sell organic white and brown Basmati imported and packed in Europe (Baule volante, Bologna, La finestra sul cielo, Villareggia -To).

With the growth of its demand, Basmati started to be imported directly by Italian companies (Riserie Monferrato, Monferrato – AI, under the Sunclad brand; Riseria Pigino, Palazzolo – VC; Riseria Vignola, Balzona - AI) and to make its appearance in supermarkets.

Lately big and renown Italian companies of rice started to import and to sell Basmati under their own brand. The first one was Riso Scotti that now sells it in two versions: classic and rapid. The rapid version it is sold in a bag that can be place directly in the microwave or that it can be cooked in the pan in two minutes.

15 As a consequence of the high presence of Indian immigrants, the UK was the first place in Europe where Indian cuisine and food products became popular and widespread. In the UK are based two of the biggest and most famous producers and wholesaler company of Indian food products in Europe: Patak (founded in London in the 1950s) and Sharwood’s as well as a lot of other wholesalers of Indian food.
Fig. 7 and 8 - Basmati of the Riso Scotti in the two version available: traditional and rapid

Source: www.risoscotti.it

Another example is Riso Gallo that has a line of exotic rice, *Grandi risi dal Mondo* (Great rice from the world: “Flavours and perfumes coming from afar, selected by Riso Gallo in exotic and wild lands”) that includes: Basmati, Patna, Thai and Red, Long and Wild, Venere.

An interesting case is Coop, a chain of no-profit supermarket especially diffused in the Centre of Italy, that packs and sells Basmati with its own brand in the line of fine food called *Fior fiore*.

Fig. 9 and 10 – Basmati from Riso Gallo and Coop.
On the Italian market, imported Basmati coexist with varieties of aromatic rice cultivated in Italy that comes from the crossing of Basmati with varieties that can grow well on the Italian soil.

The first to be introduced was Gange (1995), followed by Fragrance (2000) and Apollo (2002). Often on the package the name of the Italian variety is accompanied by the word Basmati to tell the customer what type of rice he is about to buy (i.e. Basmati Gange). This, anyhow, can be misleading since Italian aromatic rice varieties are quite different from Basmati. The grains are long but thicker and they lack the translucency and, above all, the fragrance of sandalwood typical of Basmati. They resemble more the American long grain rice than the aromatic varieties.

The Italian “aromatic” rice can target those customers that would like to try something different but that do not want to give up the sense of security (regarding, for example, quality or hygiene) given by an Italian product. It has to be noted, though, that very often consumers are not very knowledgeable of the different varieties of rice and the word Basmati on the label might add to the confusion.

Many consumers do not know exactly what they are looking for when they go for Basmati and tend to confuse the varieties that have long grains.

A women wrote a disappointed letter to the Coop’s customer service in Florence because looking for Basmati rice (that was actually present in the supermarket she was shopping in) she ended up with Thaibonnet:16

> Since I eat Basmati regularly I went to the Coop situated in Via Viareggio in Prato to get a bag of it. I found only two brands: Scotti (Italian product and not the original one from Thailand) and Thai rice with the Coop’s own brand. I went for the last one also taking into consideration Coop’s quality. I found out that Thai rice is not at all like the Basmati rice that can be bought in other supermarkets (that has a distinctive aroma and scent) and I ended up with a bag of normal rice [...] (Coop Firenze, 2004).

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16 When this letter was published, Coop’s branded Basmati was not yet on the market.
The above letter shows a terrible confusion on what Basmati rice is and where it comes from. The Scotti branded Basmati it is imported and not produced in Italy like all the other Italian branded Basmati but the impression of the cited customer is legitimate. The Italian legislation do not require producers to state where the rice (as well as all other products) is cultivated but only where it is processed and packed. The consequence is that consumers, just by reading the product’s label, cannot trace where the rice originally comes from. They will only be able to know where it has been processed (most companies import rough Basmati rice\(^{17}\)) and packed. The Coop brand Thai rice the customer was referring to in the letter was actually Thaibonnet, a variety selected by the French during the colonial period, that is cultivated in Italy (the package features the symbol of the Italian rice) and it is very different from Basmati. The appearance might be similar (the grain is long but not as slender as Basmati’s and the translucency is totally missing) but it totally lacks the fragrance. It is much cheaper too. About one third of the Basmati’s price.

As the Coop’s customer who wrote the letter, many consumers do not know what Basmati exactly is and where it comes from. And they are not helped much by rice selling companies who do not state the provenience on the package and sometimes offer a misleading imagery. Riso Scotti, for example, placed on the Basmati rice package a picture of Basmati held by Chinese chopsticks (Fig. 7). On the other hand, to counter all misunderstanding Coop’s branded Basmati, that Coop buys from Riso Scotti already packed with its own brand (it is stated on the package), is the only one on sale in Italy that has a map of India on the box with the Punjab region coloured in white to state the provenience of the product.

Conclusion
As previously stated Italians are not big rice consumers. Pasta plays a much more important role in the every day diet especially in areas that are far away from rice producing regions. Pasta is cheap, quick and easy to prepare and it finds a wide taste consent. Every region has its own traditional pasta dishes that are reproduced or made lighter, easier or faster to satisfy today’s need. In spite of this Basmati rice is conquering for itself a space in a market more and more interested in new flavours, in ethnic food and in multiculturalism. An interest that is fuelled by the encounter with people coming from other gastronomic tradition (a rather recent phenomenon in Italy) and by travels (people that has tasted flavours of far away countries and has liked it, will look for them back home). Basmati is also taking advantage of a general indiamania that in the last couple of years has been all the rage in Italy. As a consequence the import of Basmati has more than double in the last couple of years and renown Italian rice companies are selling Basmati under their own brand.

Bibliography

\(^{17}\) Since September 1st 2004 traditional varieties of husked Basmati rice (or hybrid varieties that keeps at least one “pure line” parent) can enter the European Union free of duty (Subhan, 2004).


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