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“ Milan were awarded a free kick and I nearly nudged Ronaldinho aside to take a quick one ” Giles Smith

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From The Times

January 31, 2009

Italy bans kebabs and foreign food from cities



Richard Owen in Rome

The tomato comes from Peru and spaghetti was probably a gift from China.

It is, though, the “foreign” kebab that is being kicked out of Italian cities as it becomes the target of a campaign against ethnic food, backed by the centre-right Government of Silvio Berlusconi.

The drive to make Italians eat Italian, which was described by the Left and leading chefs as gastronomic racism, began in the town of Lucca this week, where the council banned any new ethnic food outlets from opening within the ancient city walls.

Yesterday it spread to Lombardy and its regional capital, Milan, which is also run by the centre Right. The antiimmigrant Northern League party brought in the restrictions “to protect local specialities from the growing popularity of ethnic cuisines”.

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Luca Zaia, the Minister of Agriculture and a member of the Northern League from the Veneto region, applauded the authorities in Lucca and Milan for cracking down on nonItalian food. “We stand for tradition and the safeguarding of our culture,” he said.

Mr Zaia said that those ethnic restaurants allowed to operate “whether they serve kebabs, sushi or Chinese food” should “stop importing container loads of meat and fish from who knows where” and use only Italian ingredients.

Asked if he had ever eaten a kebab, Mr Zaia said: “No – and I defy anyone to prove the contrary. I prefer the dishes of my native Veneto. I even refuse to eat pineapple.”

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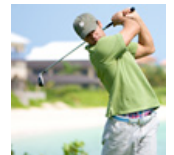
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Mehmet Karatut, who owns one of four kebab shops in Lucca, said that he used Italian meat only.

Davide Boni, a councillor in Milan for the Northern League, which also opposes the building of mosques in Italian cities, said that kebab shop owners were prepared to work long hours, which was unfair competition.

"This is a new Lombard Crusade against the Saracens," *La Stampa*, the daily newspaper, said. The centre-left opposition in Lucca said that the campaign was discrimination and amounted to "culinary ethnic cleansing".

Vittorio Castellani, a celebrity chef, said: "There is no dish on Earth that does not come from mixing techniques, products and tastes from cultures that have met and mingled over time."

He said that many dishes thought of as Italian were, in fact, imported. The San Marzano tomato, a staple ingredient of Italian pasta sauces, was a gift from Peru to the Kingdom of Naples in the 18th century. Even spaghetti, it is thought, was brought back from China by Marco Polo, and oranges and lemons came from the Arab world.

Mr Castellani said that the ban reflected growing intolerance and xenophobia in Italy. It was also a blow to immigrants who make a living by selling ethnic food, which is popular because of its low cost. There are 668 ethnic restaurants in Milan, a rise of nearly 30 per cent in one year.

The centre Right won national elections in April last year partly because of alarm about crime and immigration. This week there was a series of attacks on immigrants in bars and shops after the arrest of six Romanians accused of gang-raping an Italian girl in the Rome suburb of Guidonia.

Filippo Candelise, a Lucca councillor, said: "To accuse us of racism is outrageous. All we are doing is protecting the culinary patrimony of the town."

Massimo Di Grazia, the city spokesman, said that the ban was intended to improve the image of the city and to protect Tuscan products. "It targets McDonald's as much as kebab restaurants," he added.

There is confusion, however, over what is meant by ethnic. Mr Di Grazia said that French restaurants would be allowed. He was unsure, though, about Sicilian cuisine. It is influenced by Arab cooking.

HAVE YOUR SAY

This is great!
Perhaps a bit over the top (as always in Italy. ;) but the general idea of supporting your indigenous culture is awesome.

Forza Italia!
Chris, Stockholm, Sweden

I wish we would do the same thing in Sweden!
Erik, Sthlm,

I can see the point to an extent. But in general, I disagree.

When I was in Lucca last summer, Italian restaurants I was in didn't seem all that empty!
Paddy, Kent, UK

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