

The Struggle for Food: From Malthusian Tension to OGM, and Beyond (19th-21th Centuries)

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The Italian Preservation Industry from the 19th century

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Abstract

Preserved food has a long history, as the methods used can be very simple (e.g. using oil or vinegar, or smoking meat and fish). In the 19th century, a new system was discovered and quickly gained ground, leading to the birth of the canned food industry. After its beginnings in the Napoleonic era, it developed in the second part of the 19th century and during the Second Industrial Revolution. The food preservation industry (canned fruit, vegetables, meat and fish) mostly contributed to the globalization of food consumption and its development had many implications for the economy of the time. For instance, new opportunities for growth became available for entrepreneurs, who had previously restricted their production and distribution to local markets given the perishable nature of fruit and vegetables. The canning industry also needed and encouraged mechanization, scientific research and new technological processes in packaging and storage systems, which in turn drove up the demand for new materials. Canned food was relatively cheap, and its growing availability to the working classes was closely linked to social and cultural changes, which by the end of the 19th century involved the increase of migration flows overseas, mass urbanization and the growth of the role of women in industrialized economies. During the 19th century, other refrigeration systems were improved and employed, allowing perishable food to be transported over greater distances, collected from a larger area and then transformed and packaged.

In Italy, the canning industry first emerged in the mid-19th century, when demand from the army led to the first attempts at production. After 1870 the effects of several political and economic changes, which were underway during the century, started to be felt and paved the way for a rapid growth in national and international trade combined with increasing modernization and diversification of food production: national unification, the transport revolution, scientific discoveries and technological improvements, mass migration - all contributed to generating a progressive trend and positive economic circumstances for the sector. From 1885 onwards, Italy exported an increasing amount of preserved fruit and vegetables to Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France and the Americas (especially the USA): the value rose from half a million Lire in 1885 to 61 million in 1915, while exports of cured or preserved meat accounted for a further 15 million Lire. Several Italian areas, from north to south, were involved in this production: Liguria

provided dried mushrooms; Friuli and Emilia concentrated on treating pork and beef; Campania specialised in vegetables preserved with oil and vinegar; Sicily in salted fish. Meanwhile domestic consumption was increasing, due to the growing number of women from the countryside who were employed in factories. The preservation of tomatoes soon became one of the most important commodities required by the markets. In this context, the canned food industry also developed. At the turn of the 19th century, more complicated methods, modern machines and multiple devices began to be used in new factories. A special role in the expansion of the exportation of preserved food was played by a Piedmont entrepreneur, Francesco Cirio (1836-1900) a self-made man of humble origins, who started producing fruit and vegetable preserves in Piedmont in the middle of the 19th century and then expanded the business to involve more and more specialized farmers and producers from all around Italy. He connected domestic production of foodstuffs to international markets, investing in canning, transport and distribution, and had a revolutionary vision of the new opportunities for Italian produce.

The interwar period was a phase of consolidation and strong growth for the sector, characterized by the creation of trade associations which played an important role in guiding and overseeing companies in the sector. The development was mostly in vegetable preserves (mainly, but not exclusively, tomatoes), especially destined for US market, which stimulated fruit and vegetable production, shaping the agricultural landscape of some Italian regions. The integration between fruit and vegetable production and the processing industry grew, and Emilia and Campania, already important in the pre-war period, strengthened their role as poles of development for the canning industry. In the post-war years, vegetable preserves became increasingly available in the domestic markets of northern Italy, where canned meat also began to be popular. Moreover, there were changes in the export markets for canned vegetables: the USA lost its central role, while that of Europe was strengthened, in particular in Germany, where the strong flows of Italian intra-European migration brought about an upsurge in demand.

The contribution presents some reflections on the canning industry in Italy from the 19th century up to the mid-20th century, exploring its evolution in production, markets and consumption. First, the paper examines the launch of the sector, with its early attempts to develop production, focusing on the destination markets and on the pioneer enterprises and their strategies. In the next section, the paper gives an overview of long-term industry trends and growth during the 20th century, using available statistical sources and building some historical data series on production dynamics (sectors and exports).