

PASTA POSTERS

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Food with Attitude: 130 Years of Pasta on Posters

A life without pasta? Such an existence is difficult to imagine—and certainly not desirable. We encounter this food daily—if not on our dinner plate then in the supermarket, in advertising, or on social media. For a number of years now pasta has also been found hanging on walls—in the form of posters. Such images are readily marketed on online sites, and serve as normal decor in many domestic kitchens. What is behind their success? And why have these fabulous images never before been assembled and published in catalogue form? Propaganda posters, travel posters, airline posters, film posters, posters of bicycles: up to now all these have been the focus of collectors and publishers. So what about posters featuring these culinary mainstays? The present publication seeks to fill this void, and represents the first attempt to explore the “pasta poster,” encompassing a range of nations, historical periods, and styles. Pasta posters unite the enjoyment of food with a characteristic attitude toward life. Cuisine, nostalgia, romantic images of Italy—an irresistible combination. Pasta is aesthetically appealing, appetizing, comfort food for the eye. Pasta stands for the good life. It is seen as trouble-free, evoking only positive associations, evoking memories of vacations, of dining with friends, of romantic dates, of childhood and family. In the 1980s Barilla honed this message into a simple slogan: “Dove c’è Barilla c’è casa” (essentially: “Home is where Barilla is”).

Altogether, 16.9 million tons of pasta were produced in the year 2022, and production levels are rising.¹ Despite the extraordinary popularity of this edible, the interplay between pasta and design has never received significant attention—presumably due to the fear that such an endeavor would be regarded as banal.

Over the past 130 years, in fact, a number of celebrated designers have turned their attention toward pasta, among them Leonetto Cappiello, Ludwig Hohlwein, Raymond Savignac, Erberto Carboni, Seymour Chwast, and Milton Glaser—to name only a few greats. There are pasta posters in the style of the Belle Époque, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Socialist Realism, in the Swiss graphic style, and in diverse styles used by modern advertising agencies and contemporary illustrators. Not only do these images reflect stylistic trends, with all their aesthetic mutability, they also testify to technical and economic progress, documenting social change, consumer culture, and culinary fads. And they offer insights into the public images cultivated by pasta manufacturers, along with the history of corporate design and marketing, at the same time chronicling the uninterrupted enthusiasm for a dish found on dining tables around the world.

The History of Pasta in 79 Posters

This book is devoted to pasta and graphic design—namely through the posters that bring the two together. The focus is on western, and specifically Mediterranean noodle-making culture, commonly associated with Italy.² Through museums, archives, and with the assistance of manufacturers and creative producers, 79 posters have been assembled here, mainly from Italy, but also from France, Switzerland, Germany, Greece, and some other countries. For the most part, the selection showcases the work of painters, graphic artists, and illustrators, while a smaller number of posters are based on photographic imagery. Since posters specializing in the pasta motif have never been systematically catalogued, and an awareness of corporate history on the part of individual manufacturers represents the exception rather than the rule, this book is conceived not so much as a final, encyclopedic presentation as an invitation to further exploration—and hopefully an inspiration to all passionate lovers of both pasta and graphic design.

Children of Industrialization

As it happens, both pasta and posters are economical to produce, and are only practicable when manufactured serially in large quantities. So it is hardly surprising that both of these products enjoyed tremendous international breakthroughs in the context of 19th-century industrialization.³ For the first time steam engines were employed in factories to run the kneading machines, and industrial drying rooms were developed, allowing the production of unprecedented quantities of pasta, which then had to be delivered to customers.⁴ Founded in the 19th century as well were many of the firms we still recognize today on supermarket shelves: Buitoni, Barilla, and De Cecco in Italy, Rivoire & Carret in France, Birkel in Germany, Catelli in Canada, Matarazzo in Argentina, and many more. The industrialization of pasta manufacture reconfigured the market, spurring competition. From this point onward it was a question of prevailing against the competition with a product whose unique selling points were not always readily

perceptible. Under these circumstances, it became necessary to attract attention to the individual brand. As it happens, a newly emergent visual medium seemed tailor-made for this purpose, one that emerged in the late 19th century, permanently transforming the cityscape—namely, the poster.⁵ And ever since, autodidacts, painters, designers and marketing experts have devoted their skills to serving the pasta industry. An ephemeral vehicle, intended for use on streets, on bulletin boards, advertising columns, and in special lighted display cases—a mass medium virtually predestined to cater to a comestible that was among the earliest street foods in history. And while poster styles continually change in fundamental ways, the basic intention remains the same: to convey a message to passers-by as quickly as possible in order to attract new customers to your product. A task that sets no limits to creativity and inventiveness.

How is Pasta Marketed?

It was only a matter of time before the early pasta manufacturers decided to take advantage of the new medium, hiring artists to produce advertising posters. Around the turn of the 20th century Leonetto Cappiello, an Italian active in Paris, was among the first artists to design a poster for a pasta maker.⁶ His poster for the Ferrari firm dates from 1904, and can be related stylistically to the *Japonisme* so fashionable during the Belle Époque. His image displays a festive company wearing elegant costumes (contemporaries would have immediately identified the depicted individuals as prominent actors from Parisian stages), shown holding little packages containing vermicelli. With Ludwig Hohlwein, one of the most outstanding and politically controversial poster designers, packaging also played an important role: on his poster for the pasta manufacturer Dr. Klopfer, dating from 1912, we see a gigantic figure handing a package of noodles to the jubilant masses—affordable carbohydrates for ordinary people.⁷ Dating from 1933/34 is a poster for the Venetian firm Molino Stucky designed by Marcello Dudovich, who uses a Futurist aesthetic to show a pigeon taking a nosedive while holding a golden-yellow package of “super pasta” in its beak. Up to the present, pasta manufacturers continue to use images that incorporate product packaging—evidently the most important distinguishing feature for many consumers. To an increasing degree beginning in the 1950s, with the rise of self-service shops and modern packaging, posters and packaging have formed a visual unity: colors, shapes, and typefaces are designed to ensure ready recognition, guiding the customer’s hand to the right product on the right shelf.

Other motifs have stood the test of time as well, and to an astonishing degree: pasta consists of semolina made from durum wheat (*grano duro*) and water, or bread wheat (*grano tenero*) and egg—ingredients deriving from agriculture. When it comes to marketing pasta, fields of wheat, with their golden ears waving in warm sunlight, are still among the most highly favored images. A universally graspable image that stands for naturalness and healthfulness, and is hence useful in disguising the product’s industrial origins. On historical posters in particular, female figures are shown alongside ears of wheat and fields of

grain—they are of course meant to embody fertility in the spirit of the goddess Demeter/Ceres.⁸ Men and children, by contrast, make an appearance as insatiable *mangiamaccheroni* (macaroni eaters), shown shoveling enormous quantities of pasta into their mouths—ideally using both hands. A motif, incidentally, that is familiar from cultural history, and was disseminated beginning in the 18th century by tourists in Naples on their Grand Tours. But depictions of hens and eggs have also remained a mainstay of pasta advertising down through the decades. Particularly in times of shortages, in wartime, for example, eggs were used to symbolize the wholesomeness of food products. Prevalent today, with the rise of veganism, is the popularity of pasta that does without eggs, an animal-based ingredient. At times, the presence of gluten has been prized as an attribute of quality: it ensures cooking stability, elasticity and texture in pasta, while today there is a separate market for gluten-free or protein-rich products—to each era, its pasta.

Astonishingly, pasta—the actual product itself—is not visually present with any great frequency. This accounts for the revolutionary quality of Lucian Bernhard's 1915 poster for the Saxony-based manufacturer Riesa: he displays the noodles in their box austere, exactly as they appear in stark daylight against the neutral ground. With this design, he introduces the genre of the pasta poster to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* aesthetic (the so-called *Sachplakat*, or objective poster). Bernhard's move seems all the more astonishing when we consider the marked fondness for the surreal and the magical that prevailed during the interwar era. Federico Seneca's poster series for Buitoni, produced in 1928, relies on strong figure-ground contrast and the incisiveness with which his enigmatic figures emerge from their dark backdrops. In his poster series for Pianigiani, Achille Luciano Mauzan exploited a similar aesthetic; the figure with the long nose and the pointed cap is not a clown but the Neapolitan folk hero Pulcinella, whose unmistakable hunger for macaroni is the stuff of fairy tales.

In times of political propaganda, war, and destruction, advertising motifs become more playful, the competition for attention at times veering toward the grotesque: the advertising figures themselves now consist of pastas playing the roles of knights or lovers, even devouring themselves, as in a poster by Richard Roth, who alludes to a figure from a well-known advertisement for a tire manufacturer. The darker the times, the more imperative humor in advertising posters. From a present-day perspective, the posters of the 1930s and 1940s give the impression of flights from reality. At the same time, different rules seem to apply to the pasta industry, where an unpretentious informality seems almost compulsory: as early as 1910, Siegmund von Suchodolski's poster for a manufacturer from the Alsace region shows a dachshund pouncing on freshly cooked macaroni. Up to the present, pasta advertisements seem less constrained, more mischievous than what we expect from other sectors—pasta puts people in a good mood, and posters advertising it are expected to be lighthearted.

Iconic Brands Thanks to Corporate Design

The post-war era ushered in an unstoppable momentum toward modernization, giving rise to the discipline of visual communication as we know it today. The Italian graphic designer Erberto Carboni was the first to design a modern, unified brand image for a pasta manufacturer.⁹ His work for Barilla is regarded as a milestone in this highly competitive field, and was immediately copied again and again.¹⁰ Beginning in 1951, Carboni created a professional corporate design for Barilla, extending from packaging all the way to magazine advertisements and posters, an image that continues to have an impact even today. For his poster “Barilla – la casa del buon appetito” he uses a pale blue ground, broken only by the white silhouettes of a fork and spoon. On top of them he scatters a number of pieces of pasta of various kinds. Functional, restrained, and striking: shifted dramatically into the foreground is the real focus of the image—the pasta itself. From this point onward the Barilla brand-name lettering appears in an oval, a shape reminiscent of an egg, and has meanwhile become one of the most familiar logotypes anywhere. Virtually no other pasta manufacturer has relied so consistently, and for so many decades, on modern design like the market leader from Parma. The fact that so many people today equate the name Barilla with pasta is a result of the firm’s advanced marketing philosophy and its superb feel for the visual trends of the time, as in its earliest posters and continuing right up to the present day.

With the emergence of television advertising, the poster lost its exclusive status; increasingly, posters incorporated photographic elements, and graphic designers and marketing agents took control. The 1960s saw the rise of the photographic poster, characterized by elaborate arrangements of packaging, edibles, and pasta dishes, all photographed using professional lighting. Frequently such images resemble the illustrations found in cookbooks. Exemplifying the new style of the photographic poster is an image created for the Swiss Ami firm: a rustic ambience, artfully arranged eggs and tomatoes, a ceramic dish filled with steaming hot spaghetti. The photographic poster is still dominant today, although interior decor and the approach to photographing foods have changed with the times. Many photographic posters—and this has changed little over the past few decades—present views of kitchens or restaurants. In many cases, there are few distinctive differences between manufacturers. For quite some time now it has not been the pasta itself that was showcased but the special moments supposedly associated with it. Sold through images of a get-together in a restaurant, a family meal at the dining table, an appetizing dish is the possibility of such joyous moments. Like no other image, the “spaghetti kiss,” devised by Walt Disney in 1955 for *The Lady and the Tramp*, illustrates the conjunction between romantic love and shared dining pleasure. Just recently, this iconic motif was taken up again by the Greek agency till noon in a poster campaign for Knorr. But sports and performance too can be used in effective sales pitches: Steffi Graf has appeared in poster campaigns for Barilla; Marcell Jacobs has worked with La Molisana, and currently the Polish manufacturer Lubella displays Wimbledon imagery. While visual content is often interchangeable, original workplace and slogans are increasingly important: the recipe for attracting attention is exemplified by

the “Pasta Is Naked” ad campaign mounted in autumn of 2025 by the London ad agency T&P, whose eroticized pasta, photographed to resemble exposed human skin, is used to market tomato sauces by Dolmio.

Nostalgia and the Romance of Italy

Today, by contrast, smaller manufacturers and restaurants rely on a different style, one often employed by freelance designers: photography is rejected, retro is back in style. With his fictional brand Etrusco, the Dutch designer Bart De Keyzer takes up color schemes and fonts typical of the 1950s. Zuzana Kyppö promotes her spaghetti using a geometric, minimalist style and modernist typography familiar from old Italian bars. Nicola Ferrarese reinterprets historic posters, giving them a contemporary look by way of a new lightness—for example, presenting a peeled potato in the style used by Leonetto Cappiello in 1921 for his legendary Campari poster. The buzzword is nostalgia: characteristic of the age of flawless AI-generated aesthetics is a pronounced enthusiasm for handcrafted products—and this is true of both pasta and poster art. Many of the posters illustrated here enchant the viewer with their vintage charm, a bittersweet flavor that evidently captures the spirit of the times.¹¹ Meanwhile, the major pasta manufacturers have discovered the virtues of simplicity, of goodness, of bygone times for their marketing strategies, as seen in the use of rustic design elements on packaging and posters with their retro color schemes and motifs.

It would be inconceivable to write about pasta without mentioning Italy. Which is why it seems remarkable that all things Italian emerged only relatively late in ad campaigns: during the first half of the 20th century pasta’s mother country barely played any role at all in advertising campaigns. In the wake of the Second World War, the arrival of the era of the guest worker and the new mass tourism led to a rise in the international demand for pasta products. And while countries like France, Germany, and Switzerland had long cultivated their own traditions of pasta manufacturing, Italianate elements now became increasingly observable in advertising posters, whether in the form of the Italian tricolor or tourist attractions like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Roman Colosseum, or Venetian gondolas. Even beyond the Alps such motifs were hardly a rarity, although strictly speaking the historical cradle of Italian pasta culture is to be found between Vesuvius and Etna, and less in the northern Adriatic. In 1964 the philosopher Roland Barthes analyzed an advertisement by the French manufacturer Panzani, calling attention to the color code embodied in the spaghetti, tomatoes, and cheese, which—beyond signifying the freshness of the product—he interpreted as testifying to Italianness as such, the image’s real subtext.¹² Beginning in the 1970s at the latest and continuing up to the present, Italy has served as a sales argument for foodstuffs in general, as seen in Joey Guidone’s poster series for Barilla or Lucia Gaggiotti’s work for Rummo.¹³ Gondolas and historic buildings may be clichéd as marketing devices, but they are perfectly adapted to reaching the desired target audience. The message is always the same: when you purchase a package of pasta you are acquiring a tiny piece of Italy. And who could say no to a bit of *la dolce vita* in one’s own four walls?

A Comestible with Cult Status

Since the 1980s celebrated graphic designers like Razzia, Seymour Chwast, and Milton Glaser have taken up pasta as a motif—but not necessarily to promote a pasta maker. Now pasta itself becomes a fount of imagery, its colors and forms serving as design material. Razzia has made forks and spaghetti the main elements of his posters; Chwast has configured pasta in the style of the Mannerist painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo; and Glaser has used ravioli to sell pillows. Their posters demonstrate that pasta has long since ceased to be seen as a mere comestible and now enjoys cult status. A development that continues up to the present—and without which the hype on social media around the Pasta Grannies, the Pasta Queen, and many others would be inconceivable. For more than twenty years now, Gragnano, a community located south of Naples, and known for centuries for high-quality pasta, has organized a major festival in honor of its best-known product: in 2024 Fabio Buonocore designed a poster for “Gragnano—Città della Pasta” that is illustrative of the new level reached by the pasta cult, for starring in his imagery is the pasta itself: populating the urban scenes are fusilli, rigatoni, gramigna, ruote, and mafaldine, all elements of the festival’s word-image branding.

Pasta and poster: a comestible, a graphic medium—and endless design possibilities. The pasta poster has meanwhile become an icon of graphic design and testimony to the vitality of our culinary culture. Images of pasta are appetizing, humorous, flirting with clichés, at times even stereotypical, appealing to both stomach and eye, designed to stimulate the appetite and delight the eye. Nostalgia for farm life, for family, personal reminiscences, the romantic aura of Italy: on offer is not simply a food but an attitude, a lifestyle. Today pasta is much more than economical sustenance. It is the feel-good edible par excellence—for both dinner plate and wall. Where there is pasta, friends and family come together, where there is pasta, there is joy—*dove c’è pasta, c’è gioia*.

1 International Pasta Organisation (IPO), annual report. Available online at: <https://internationalpasta.org/annual-report/>.

2 Despite the widespread belief that the navigator Marco Polo discovered noodle making in China, and brought it back to Italy, research has shown that noodles have their origin in neither China nor Italy. Instead, the ancestors of present-day pasta are traceable all the way back to Mesopotamia, and it was from there that both the eastern and western noodle cultures developed. See Massimo Montanari, *Il mito delle origini: Breve storia degli spaghetti al pomodoro*, Rome 2019.

3 Research has shown that pasta was produced in industrial dimensions, intended for export, in Sicily as early as the 12th century, although the scale was presumably not comparable with 19th century mass production.

4 Silvano Serventi and Françoise Sabban, *Pasta: The Story of a Universal Food*, New York 2002, pp. 127–196.

5 On the history of the poster, see Gill Saunders and Margaret Timmers, *The Poster: A Visual History*, London 2020.

6 With approximately twenty different posters on the theme of pasta, Ciampiello is among the pioneers of the genre in quantitative terms as well. The best known among these images is probably his Campari poster, which dates from 1921.

7 Ludwig Hohlwein was among the most influential and progressive poster designers of the early 20th century; in his later career he also placed his expertise at the service of the National Socialists, producing numerous propaganda posters for the regime. His imagery helped to shape the dictatorship’s aesthetic orientation.

8 Most recently, the Museum Wiesbaden and Petra Eisele have addressed the topic of female figures on posters in the context of an exhibition, with its accompanying catalogue: *Plakatfrauen. Frauenplakate*, ed. by Peter Forster for the Museum Wiesbaden, Berlin 2024.

9 Stefano Piantini (ed.), *Erberto Carboni*, Milan 1985.

10 F.H.K. Henrion and Alan Parkin, *Design Coordination and Corporate Image*, London et al. 1967, p. 36.

11 Agnes Arnold-Foster, *Nostalgia: A History of a Dangerous Emotion*, London 2024, pp. 127–142.

12 Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image” (1964), in Stephen Heath (ed.), *Image, Music, Text: Roland Barthes*, New York 1977, pp. 33–37.

13 Alberto Grandi, *Denominazione di origine inventata*, Milan 2018.

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