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Day 24: life in Italy under lockdown. Which went first, the chickens or the eggs?



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How has Italy avoided the problems plaguing other countries in terms of food supply? Aside a day or two of initial assault on supermarkets, the food supply here has been steady and reliable, with fresh produce a go-go and no shortage of meats, dairy, bottled water, wine, or staples.

Ivano Vacondio, president of Federalimentare, spoke with journalists today about this puzzlement, and about the ways in which the corona crisis is impacting the *agro-alimentare* (agricultural-food) sector in Italy. He reminded us that Federalimentare is the second largest industrial association in the country, representing 137 billion euro and eight percent of GDP. Its members include 7,000 businesses that employ more than 10 people each, and it has contracts with 400,000 seasonal employees.

He reassured us that there is no problem meeting current demand in the short to medium term. “We have plenty of pasta and flour to make bread. Before the crisis we were not at 100 percent production capacity for these items, so really there is no problem in supplying them.”

Overall consumption has decreased by about 20 percent since the crisis (“I prefer to call it a war,” confides the president) so Federalimentare’s members are well positioned to handle current demands. Vacondio had no doubt about his members’ ability to supply what was needed; he did wonder about Italy’s ability to deliver the goods under trying circumstances. But now he has no qualms.

He described Italy's three main food transport channels:

1. Railroads, which are working well domestically and across Europe.

2. Trucks, which are operating smoothly in Italy and well enough in Europe, despite a few slowdowns due to legitimate questions (and an initial degree of panic). The EU has appeased most of these concerns so Vacondio is not worried about this channel.

3. Ships. The maritime channel is operating well but food producers are encountering some issues with containers in port. Containers may arrive in Italian ports with merchandise that can't be emptied because the relevant businesses are closed. So the containers can't be rotated and shipped out with food for export. "This may seem a marginal problem but it could become a major one because it blocks exports," elaborated Vacondio.

The excellence of Italian foodstuffs, the reliability of its logistics, and its world-renowned cultural context give the sector three indisputable advantages to weather the corona storm. However, there are a few clouds.

· fresh produce could be at risk because of a lack of seasonal labor. "To harvest fresh produce we need workers, and we are seeing fewer field workers from eastern Europe. This translates into a problem of quantity that could be troublesome,

depending on how long this war lasts,” said Vacondio. If supply declines, prices will inevitably increase.

As with Germany and Spain, Italy relies on non-EU labor to work its fields and is currently short some 200,000 field workers. Crop harvesting begins in roughly six weeks, so Federalimentare will be looking for cooperation from the unions and the government (Italian and EU) if the war rages on.

- Price gouging is always a risk in turbulent times, though Italy’s price increases have been minimal to date. “Our current prices are about the same now as they were at end of January,” Vacondio pointed out. He acknowledged that bags of supermarket flour have increased in price as consumption in that category has doubled, but supermarket sales represent only about 10 percent of that product’s total sales. The demand from restaurants and tourism-related customers in Italy and abroad has sunk to practically zero, more than cancelling out the gains in supermarkets.

Something similar happened with wine. Wine sales to individuals have increased, as people stay at home and drink. But sales to restaurants, bars, venues related to tourism, company lunchrooms, and highway outlets have disappeared completely. So overall consumption has declined although individual consumers are buying more wine.

- Organized crime could make inroads, especially in the south,

due to the lack of liquidity. “Speaking as a citizen and as owner of an agricultural enterprise, I have to emphasize that the risk has been there since long before now,” said Vacondio. “The crisis will only accelerate it. “ He cautioned that if banks lend money only to those who don’t need the liquidity, then the *malavita* moves in. In his view, the government and ultimately the EU need to ensure that this vicious circle does not begin, and that the money the European Central Bank has made available to Italy does not end in the wrong hands. “This too is a virus,” he notes, and could become a huge problem for Italy.

A current and much smaller problem is meeting the inordinately high demand for chickens and eggs. Say what? Vacondio explained that in times of crisis, people need to feel protected so they return to traditional values. Even he had the desire to make homemade pasta and pizza for the first few days of lockdown. If consumers want more pasta, a manufacturer will add a night or weekend shift and produce the pasta, but that doesn’t work with chickens and eggs. A producer can’t in the short term make more chickens to produce more eggs. Or is it to hatch more eggs to produce more chickens?

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