

Our lard can whip your lard

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

Sometimes the Italians just don't fight fair. They get all the great food. We get all the great size. They get things like fettuccine and ravioli. We get things like 43-inch waists and tent-size T-shirts.

I have been puzzling for years over what makes so many of us fight fat while Italians eat fabulous food but remain slimmer than most Americans. If there is a god (with taste buds), why doesn't he give us the best-flavored food along with our curse of fat or give us hot slender bodies with mountains of greasy burgers?

But no. The Italians are charming so they get both the great food and the great looks. They are the chosen ones.

Of course, I'm wasting my breath. God virtually lives in Italy and he is at least half Italian himself. So of course he floods Italy with the scents and flavors and tastes of oregano, garlic, rosemary and those rich red sauces that simmer for hours before God lets his pampered pets storm the table.

But that still doesn't explain how the Italians seem to eat rich food but aren't even close to equaling our national weight and girth.

However, I think I am closing in on some of the answers. For starters, it probably isn't true that the Italians eat as much as we do. At most, if they gorge at all, they don't do it more than once a day. Most of them eat very light breakfasts. And depending on the family, they eat a heavy meal at mid-day or at night, but not both.

I've spent about eight months of my life in Italy over the years, and the difference between their eating and our eating is finally dawning on me. For starters, snacks between main meals are less accessible in Italy than in the United States. They don't have tons of chips and cookies at their fingertips. If I'm in a hotel in the U.S. and I get snacky urges for something sugary or salty, I walk down the hallway to the nearest snack machine.

In Italy, if I want a sack of chips, I have to walk half a mile or more to a grocery store. I'll go pretty far for a potato chip, but not that far, especially when I'm surrounded by Italian restaurants.

For good measure, the afternoon siesta - the big national nap - takes me out of the munchy game for a couple of hours. I have found it difficult and dangerous to munch and snooze at the same time.

A second reason for America's larger waist lines than Italians is that our food has higher calorie counts than their food does. Portion control exists more in daily Italian eating than in our

gorging. In Italy, a pizza is the size of a simple dinner plate with paper thin crust and two or three toppings. And somehow it tastes better. In America, we go more for bulk than for flavor. Our pizzas are the size and the thickness of a truck tire and they are covered with 14 different kinds of meat, including road kill.

When it comes to weight control, perhaps the biggest difference between us and Italians is that we have a lot more sugary soft drinks. If you drink three 12-ounce soft drinks per day, as many of us do, you are guzzling about 160 calories per drink or 480 calories per day total. If you drink those same soft drinks with sugar substitutes instead of sugar, the total calorie count is zero - nothing, niente.

Italians are far more likely to drink a cappuccino of steamed milk and coffee, which is roughly the same as a latte, but half the size and containing only 50 calories.

Some of our coffee drinks are much larger. They include about a gallon of liquid dessert made of coffee, whole milk, whipped cream, chocolate, caramel flavoring and enough sugar to rot the teeth out of a shark.

But I regret to inform you of some sad developments in Italy. On my latest visit, I saw more chubby people in Italy. Some of our fast food joints have invaded with massive calorie amounts in cheeseburgers, fried chicken and four-pound burritos.

When I was last in Florence, admiring Michelangelo's 17-foot nude statue of David, it looked to me like David had the start of a pot belly.

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