

PER TUA
INFORMAZIONE
(FOR YOUR INFORMATION)

BY JOE SANO

ARE WE THERE YET? I'M HUNGRY!



Italian roadside dining - good food, well prepared, conveniently available.

There is no doubt that throughout Italy and Europe one will find American burger chains and other fast-food options. Many believe that the European version of USA chains is so much better than the original USA version.

Yet they are just outclassed by the Autogrill.

Hot Shoppes, Howard Johnson's and Savarin Coffee shops all have disappeared from America's highways and have now been replaced by rest areas offering typical fast food made from ingredients often banned in the European Union. Yes, Italy can show us a better way. Autogrill's history dates back to 1947, when Mario Pavesi sought to sell cookies via food stands along highways. Inspired by large American operators like the Howard Johnson chain, Pavesi sought to replicate this in Italy. The Motta and Alemagna companies joined in this vision of roadside "sweet" stands.

Now a large corporation, the first Pavesi autogrill was located on the A4 Torino-Milano Road, intending to be a small shop for coffee, new Pavesi goods, and a place to rest. As they became more popular, Italians simply referred to them as "Autogrill" without a brand affiliation.

By the 1970s, the financial crisis decimated the Italian auto industry and, by extension, rest stops as well. The Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale (IRI), a now-defunct government agency that rescued



failing companies from bankruptcy, acquired Pavesi, Motta, and Alemagna and consolidated the companies, forming the **Autogrill** brand. In the mid-1990s, the company was privatized and the Benetton family's holding company was and continues to be the largest shareholder.

The Autogrill brand accounts for 65 percent of rest stops in Italy, while its closest competitors Chef Express and Sarni rank a distant second and third place with around 6 percent of the market each.

So your Italian roadside restaurant, especially on the autostrada (motorways), is often an Autogrill. This unique Italian concept combines a cafe, marketplace, and restaurant offering proper meals like pasta, roasted meats, and local specialties. Truly, a significant step up from typical U.S. highway fast food.

Cruise down the autostrada and pull into the first Autogrill you reach. Inside, you will find liters of olive



oil, piles of salami, whole prosciutto, balls of provolone, jars of marinated artichokes, pasta of all shapes, towers of cookie tins, mountains of chocolate bars, along with bottles of Italian wines, limoncello, and often local craft beer. There are also sandwiches of every imaginable construction and a case of sweets that will put ten pounds on you by just gazing. Indeed, it is like an Italian grocery meets a convenience store meets a coffee shop. Everything is here that you would expect to find in an American gas station combined with a gastronomical experience that has few rivals.

Now some critics will say that the Autogrill concept has slipped a bit since its inception, but it remains a unique concept based on the importance of food in Italian culture. Even actor/author Stanley Tucci speaks admirably of the Autogrill which he highlighted in an episode on the Lombardy area.

One new twist on the Autogrill concept is the latest concept of Enilive, an Italian sustainable energy company, and acclaimed chef Niko Romito, the man behind multiple Michelin-starred restaurants. They have partnered to launch the gourmet Alt Stazione del Gusto in Rome. Roughly translated to “taste station,” Alt is an electric vehicle charging station with culinary delights and a large dose of pizzazz. One such dining choice is a Bomba (bombolone), a “healthy” fried dough stuffed with your cheese choice, or protein options. One interesting sidebar is that Chef Niko studied “Dunkin” and the distribution of its frozen donuts to the shops. He replicated the same concept sending his frozen doughballs out to his ALT stations where they are then freshly prepared.



In November 2023, Autogrill S.p.A. was acquired by World Duty Free S.p.A and became part of the largest worldwide conglomerate providing for “food on the move”. Hopefully the Autogrill will remain focused on affordable, good food that is provided quickly to those on the go. □