

The Baker Who Beat McDonald's

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AFTER a five-year battle, the fast-food giant McDonald's has retreated from a southern Italian town, defeated by the sheer wholesomeness of a local baker's bread. The closure of McDonald's in Altamura, Apulia, was hailed yesterday as a victory for European cuisine against globalised fast food.

Luigi Digesù, the baker, said that he had not set out to force McDonald's to close down in any "bellicose spirit". He had merely offered the 65,000 residents tasty filled panini — bread rolls — which they overwhelmingly preferred to hamburgers and chicken nuggets. "It is a question of free choice," Signor Digesù said.

His speciality fillings include mortadella, mozzarella and eggs or scamorza cheese, eggs, basil and tomato, as well as fèdda, a local version of bruschetta — toasted bread drizzled with olive oil and salt and covered in chopped tomatoes.

McDonald's opened in a piazza in the centre of Altamura, 45km (30 miles) south of Bari, in 2001, infuriating devotees of traditional Apulia gastronomy such as Peppino Colamonicò, a doctor, and Onofrio Pepe, a journalist. They campaigned against McDonald's as the Friends of Cardoncello, named after a southern Italian mushroom.

Altamura, founded in the 5th century BC and rebuilt in the Middle Ages by Frederick II, is famed for its fragrant, golden bread — and for Signor Digesù's victorious panini.

"There was no marketing strategy, no advertising promotion, no discounts," *Il Giornale* commented. "It was just that people decided the baker's products were better. David has beaten Goliath."

The queues outside the bakery grew longer while McDonald's gradually emptied, despite the best efforts of Ronald McDonald, the mascot clown, changes of management, children's parties and special offers.

In July 2003 Altamura bread was recognised by the European Union as a protected regional product after lobbying by Enzo Lavarra, Euro MP for the Bari area, Rachele Popolizio, the Mayor of Altamura, and Giuseppe Barile, head of the local bakers' association.

Signor Pepe said that he regretted the loss of 20 jobs at McDonald's, but "tradition has won". The campaign was supported by the Slow Food Foundation, founded in 1986 by Carlo Petrini, an Italian journalist incensed by the opening of a McDonald's on the Piazza di Spagna near the Spanish Steps in Rome. It has 82,000 members in 107 countries.

Despite a series of closures around the world and active opposition, McDonald's increased worldwide sales by 4 per cent last year. Jim Skinner, the chief executive, said that it was "the leading global foodservice retailer," with more than 30,000 restaurants in more than

100 countries, 70 per cent of them “owned and operated by independent local businessmen and women.”

Shirley Foenander, vice-president for marketing and communication, said that McDonald’s had adapted to local cuisines and tastes.

But Signor Digesu’s victory was seen as more than a local setback by some. The French newspaper *Libération* said it showed that there was a “peaceful alternative” to the militancy of José Bové, the French farmer and anti-globalisation protester, who was given a three-month prison sentence after ransacking a McDonald’s in the town of Millau in 1999.

THE BREAD THAT RAN THE BIG MAC OUT OF TOWN

Altamura bread was the first baking product in Europe to be granted a DOP certificate, and is so far the only Italian bread to qualify for the honour. DOP stands for Denominazione d’Origine Protetta, or denomination of protected origin, the equivalent of DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata, or denomination of controlled origin), used for wines. DOP products must be specific to a geographic area.

The bread is made from locally grown durum wheat flour with yeast, water and marine salt, according to a recipe dating to 1500. The formula is almost certainly older, however, because Horace, the Roman poet, called the bread “the best in the world.”

The flour must be ground in mills within the communes of Altamura, Gravina di Puglia, Poggiorsini, Spinazzola and Minervino Murge, all in the province of Bari. The baking process has five stages from the rolling of the dough to baking.

It is baked in an open oak wood oven. It is unusually long-lasting and was originally created for shepherds and farmers who worked in the fields and hills of Apulia for days or even weeks at a time.

Altamura bread is the basis of several local dishes, including a winter soup called *cialda*, in which slices of the bread line a pot to which are added water, onions, tomatoes, parsley, basil, potatoes, olive oil, olives, celery and lemons.