

Italy food exports to rise up to 10% in 5 years

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MANDURIA, Apulia — Italy's agricultural exports could grow by as much as 10 percent over the next five years on the back of last December's UNESCO recognition of Italian cuisine as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, MEP Dario Nardella said at the first Forum of Italian Cuisine in Manduria, Apulia. The March 29 forum, organised by Comin & Partners, also heard warnings that US tariffs and a weakening dollar could risk squeezing Italian exporters.

Italy's food and drink sector recorded exports of 69.1 billion euro in 2024, an all-time high, according to Coldiretti and ISTAT. Wine led at 8.1 billion euro, followed by fruit and vegetables, cheese, pasta, and olive oil. Speaking at Masseria Li Reni, organised by Bruno Vespa and Comin & Partners in collaboration with ICE, Italy's government trade promotion agency, Nardella argued the UNESCO recognition awarded in New Delhi in December 2025 could push that figure substantially higher.

"If used well, not just as a badge for politicians," he told Italy Now, "Italian cuisine could fuel export growth by some 10 percent over the next five years." He framed the recognition as an obligation as much as an opportunity. "The first effort must be made in Italy itself," he said, "where there is much to do on school meals, food education, and in restaurants where Italian food is not always given priority on menus."

The prize

A Deloitte study cited at the forum by Giordano Emo Capodilista, vice president of Confagricoltura, Italy's principal agricultural entrepreneurs' association, placed the current global value of Italian cuisine at 251 billion euro, growing at 4.5 percent annually and potentially reaching 300 billion euro. The United States and China together account for 80 billion euro of that figure. EU trade agreements

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under negotiation, including the Mercosur accord and pending deals with India and Australia, could accelerate growth by reducing tariffs on wine, cheese, and olive oil.

The headwind

ICE president Matteo Zoppas was more measured on the near term. US tariffs introduced in April 2025, combined with an unfavourable euro-dollar rate, are compressing margins as exporters negotiate annual price renewals. Italian wine exports to the United States fell 3.5 percent in January 2026, against a 19 percent rise in the same month a year earlier. “We must absolutely push promotion,” Zoppas said, “because wine faces a tariff and exchange rate issue but above all a shift in consumer behaviour, and that is what should concern us most.” ICE is responding by scaling its international activity: it brings approximately 12,000 foreign buyers to Italy annually, supports around 6,500 Italian companies abroad through 90 offices worldwide, and has confirmed a 20 percent increase in foreign buyers at Vinitaly this year.

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