



## Italy's Home Cooks Stir Up a Backlash Among Restaurants

Popularity of social-dining platforms is soaring; traditional eateries lobby for restrictions

Guests enjoy Sunday lunch at Claudia Proietti's house. Ms. Proietti, whose home is just outside of Rome, benefits from the spread of the sharing economy across Italy, as many of her patrons book through the social eating site, Gnammo. NADIA SHIRA COHEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



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By *Pietro Lombardi*

Updated March 27, 2017 11:26 a.m. ET

ZAGAROLO, Italy—On a recent Sunday, Claudia Proietti whipped up a sumptuous lunch of cheese and black pepper ravioli in an asparagus and guanciale sauce, slow-cooked veal and roast potatoes.

The 60-year-old picked the herbs from the garden behind her rustic home in this town just outside Rome, while the olive oil and white Malvasia wine came from the small farm she and her husband own. The smell of baking bread filled the living room, where she would serve lunch, topped off with a rosemary Bavarian cake and ice-cold limoncello.



Claudia Proietti, who runs a restaurant in her home just outside of Rome, serves up fettuccine with an asparagus and bacon sauce PHOTO: NADIA SHIRA COHEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

But the meal wasn't just a labor of love. Most of the 14 diners had booked the lunch through Gnammo, a social-dining platform that brings together home chefs and diners. Each paid €25 (\$27) for the experience, one of 50 meals and other events Ms. Proietti, an insurer who is one of Gnammo's most popular cooks, has hosted in her home over the past two years.



These scenes are increasingly frequent in Italy, as the sharing economy extends its reach into Italian kitchens. But it is provoking a backlash from the country's powerful restaurant sector and drawing government scrutiny.

Home restaurants are said to have got their start in the 1990s in Cuba's paladares, private homes where tourists ate cheap and authentic meals made by locals, before they took off in Britain and the U.S. around 2005.

They are now spreading across Italy, prompting the ire of restaurants, who view social dining as unfair competition. The traditional eateries, already struggling with heavier regulations and a stagnant economy, complain home cooks exploit a regulatory gray area that allows them to ignore health and safety rules and operate under the table.

"With basically no rules, home restaurants are competing unfairly with traditional eateries," said Stefania Porcelli, who runs a traditional family restaurant in Rome's Trastevere neighborhood.

According to Italian restaurant associations, home restaurants served about one million diners last year, three times as many as in 2014. Home-dining platforms say the business is still small, though they acknowledge it is soaring. Gnammo, the biggest platform in the country, counted 7,000 diners last year, up from 1,700 in 2014, and has 225,000 members. Many home restaurants also solicit patrons through Facebook pages or their own websites, according to restaurateurs.

Photos:

#### Sunday lunch in Claudia Proietti's home



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Home chefs say they are driven by a love of food and the chance to socialize with new people. In Rome's Tiburtino neighborhood, Francesca Andreone and Daniele Saleggia have opened up their home, where they scribble the menu on a door-turned-blackboard. The couple, who are in their 30s and often collect recipes from their travels, recently hosted a Scottish-Chinese couple.

"It was like traveling to two, far-off parts of the world in the space of one dinner," said Ms. Andreone.

They say they earn so little from the meals that it is more like a hobby than a business. Social-dining advocates say their informality and small size means they shouldn't be regulated in the same way as regular restaurants.

"It's a drop in the ocean for [traditional] restaurants," said Angelo Colleoni, who has patronized a dozen social-dining events.

Restaurant owners have little truck with such explanations.

"Even losing just 12 or 15 customers per week may put small, family-run restaurants out of business," said Matteo Musacci, a restaurateur in the central Italian town of Ferrara.

In response to pressure from restaurants, Italy's lower house of Parliament in January approved a bill limiting home restaurants to no more than 500 customers and €5,000 (\$5,400) in revenues a year. But restaurateurs are urging the government to impose heavier rules, particularly in health and safety.

The tussle comes as Italy's sharing economy is gathering steam after years of tepid growth. The sector was valued at about €3.5 billion in 2015, according to a recent study by the University of Pavia, which predicted its value could reach €25 billion by 2025. Italians are already among the biggest European users of carpooling services and the country is Airbnb's third-largest market for inbound guests, with listings having tripled over the past three years to 270,000.

Yet such services are meeting stiff resistance from lobbies, regulators and unions. Taxi

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drivers last month staged a five-day protest against a bill allowing the government to delay an “anti-Uber” regulation. The government moved ahead with the delay, but it has since promised to roll out the regulation.

Local authorities in Tuscany and elsewhere want to impose limits on residents leasing their homes through Airbnb, while Italy’s regulators and banking lobby remain wary of crowdfunding and peer-to-peer lending platforms.

Home cooks fear a coming squeeze on their activity.

“Restaurateurs fear an Airbnb-effect but their anger is exaggerated,” Ms Proietti said. “We are not even in competition. Our markets are different, just like the experience we offer.”

*Appeared in the March 28, 2017, print edition as ‘Italy’s Home Cooks Stir Up a Restaurant Backlash.’*

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