

Globe Toronto

Move over, baloney; 'Real mortadella' — Italy's king of sausages — finally makes its debut in Toronto delis

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You may think you know mortadella. But that's baloney — at least if you've been eating it here in Canada. The authentic, Italian-made version of the famous giant sausage made its first Canadian appearance in Toronto last week, stirring excitement among cold-cut connoisseurs and confusion among consumers.

Max Stefanelli, manager of the Terroni restaurant chain, is exuberant about the news. "We have been waiting for a while for the real mortadella," says Mr. Stefanelli, who came to Canada from Bologna six years ago. "Most important for me is that it's almost impossible to make perfect tortellini without good mortadella. But now we can."

For many Torontonians, this may come as a surprise. Canadians, like Americans, have been eating domestic versions of mortadella for decades, whether it's the bland baloney of Oscar Mayer's legacy or artisanal styles that some say can compare to the original.

But like champagne in France, true mortadella has to earn the name. It's the rich, top-grade stuff, approved by the Mortadella Bologna Consortium, that has now come to Canada. And for that, foodies can thank importer Michael Tkaczuk. Mr. Tkaczuk, who owns **Serrano Imports**, embarked on a year-long quest to bring authentic high-end mortadella here, and finally managed to persuade an Italian producer to adapt its facility to suit Canadian health standards.

He chose a pricey brand, the northern Italian company Baldo, and half-cuts from 12-kilo sausages. "The larger the size, the slower the cooking and the higher the quality of the end product," he says. For consumers, that means up to double the price (\$25 to \$30 a kilo), but aficionados say the real thing is worth the fuss.

Tom Sfetkopoulos, the deli manager for the Longo's chain, will be happy to sell it to them. "The Italian product has a smoother texture and it's a lot more aromatic," he says. "It comes down to taste, and some people wouldn't want something this fragrant."

You could describe it as “herbaceous” — like stepping into a deli in Italy where the air is thick with the scent of pork products aging and drying in the back of the shop. And the cubes of pork fat, or lardelli, should melt on the tongue.

Known in its hometown of Bologna as “the king of sausage,” mortadella originated in the Middle Ages and has the distinction of being, since 1661, the first regulated meat product in Italy.

Soft pink and cylindrical, it is lean pork finely ground to a creamy consistency, stuffed with fat from the throat of a pig — a choice cut — and cooked slowly in a low oven. Then it's quickly cooled in a kind of cold shower and dried. The end product is silken and somewhat sweet.

Domestic producers, such as Brampton-based Casa Italia, often alter their product to reflect local tastes. Giovanna Varricchione, vice-president of Casa Italia, says her company has “tweaked” the original Italian recipes to appeal to health-conscious consumers. The result is a mortadella that is about 20 per cent fat (half the Italian standard) and lower in salt.

Ms. Varricchione welcomes the arrival of the original Italian sausage into Canada. “That's the beauty of this country, that we have the opportunity to have both.”

The Canadian government has been notoriously slow in allowing foreign meats past its borders. Those seeking the real Italian flavour had to do as Sophia Loren did in the 1972 movie, *La Mortadella*: Not believing any country would ban this traditional wedding gift (in her case, it's for newlyweds in the United States), she sets about to smuggle the sausage herself.

Mr. Tkaczuk's prolonged effort to bring in mortadella wasn't his first battle; his company is named for the famous Spanish Serrano ham he fought for years to bring into Canada, finally succeeding last year. But now that mortadella has won the regulators' approval, Mr. Tkaczuk hopes the door will stay open for a banquet of salamis and other cooked sausages.

Most of his customers, particularly those with Italian roots, approve of Mr. Tkaczuk's initial pick, although some are asking him for a type of mortadella made from horsemeat. “I tell them I don't think Canada is ready for horse. Not yet.”