



Sebastian Heinrich

Italy in a Nutshell

Italy Explained One Word at a Time

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

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[...] This book follows the same structure as my podcast “Italy in a Nutshell”. Each chapter is based on an untranslatable Italian word – that is, a word that cannot be easily translated into German. *La parola*, or the word, is the title of the first part of each of the fifteen chapters, and includes a few key points about the untranslatable expression, to make it clear right at the outset what we’re actually talking about.

Behind each of these untranslatable terms is a story. A story that helps us to understand one particular aspect of Italy, to scratch beneath the surface of the clichés and simplistic images that millions of people in the German-speaking world have of Italy. I tell these stories in the second and longest section of the chapters, which are titled *La storia dietro la parola* (the story behind the word).

And then I end each chapter with a few sentences of *passaparola*, which literally means “word of mouth”. These are recommendations that will give you the chance to spend a little more time with the stories behind each chapter: mostly through books and movies from Italy.

Italy is a wonderful country that has been hauled out of severe crises by hard-working, clever, and courageous people, rising from a poor country on the edge of Europe to become a prosperous founding member of the European Union. Italy is a terrible country that fascists dragged into the abyss, that was home to unparalleled levels of violence in the 1970s by European standards, and that has been falling way behind the rest of the continent for a good three decades.

I refuse to accept either the distorted image of a basket-case country of financially irresponsible spendthrifts or the kitschy, tacky romanticism of *la dolce vita*. In a conversation with another podcaster, I once summarised the guiding principle behind my work on “Italy in a Nutshell”, both the podcast and the book, with the following, simple motto: my aim is to take Italy seriously.

Autogrill: The Gateway to Italy

La parola – the word:

Autogrill [auto 'grill] – brand name, a portmanteau of “car” and “grill”, short for “grillroom”; a kind of roadside diner along a highway, usually connected to a gas station.

La storia dietro la parola – the story behind the word:

Steel girder by steel girder, concrete block by concrete block, they rip a gigantic souvenir out of the surrounding landscape. After five and a half decades, they are removing this memento of the Italian economic miracle from Val di Chiana, the valley between Arezzo and Orvieto in southern Tuscany, through which the A1 highway snakes. In October 2021, construction crews removed the Montepulciano bridge rest stop. For decades, right in the middle of this agricultural region in the centre of Italy, this several-ton creation had saddled the highway, hovering above the cars. Another *Autogrill* disappears from the landscape. And what an *Autogrill* it was.

The untranslatable Italian places known by the name of *Autogrills* have a meaning that cannot be fully captured in the term “rest stop”. For presumably hundreds of thousands of visitors to Italy who enter to the country from the north in a family car or on a bus, the *Autogrills* are landmarks on the road to their holiday destinations. People who drive to Italy via the Brenner Pass or through Chiasso or Tarvisio sip their first espresso or bite into their first *cornetto* on Italian soil in Adige, Villoresi or Fella, giving them their first hit of Italy. But hardly any of them get a sense of the role that the *Autogrill* plays in Italy’s national identity.

You can hear a hint of it in the words with which journalist Maddalena Pieroni reported on the completion of the demolition work at the Montepulciano bridge rest stop on

the local television station ToscanaTV. As a shot of the cranes standing next to the last remnants of the steel skeleton of the *Autogrill* is shown, we hear Peroni voice saying that this building here, in the south of Tuscany, had been the “concretization of the American dream”.

When this *Autogrill* was opened in 1967, just a few metres from the train station of the small township of Montepulciano, the gigantic weathering steel frame of the building loomed over this rural setting like an object from some distant future: tall glass façades, red shutters on the windows and a big red sign on the roof in the shape of a stylized dog bone with the lettering: “Autogrill Pavesi”. It was designed by Angelo Bianchetti, a star of Italian postwar architecture who translated the unique spirit of that era, with its unfailing faith in the future, into spectacular buildings.

In her television report, Maddalena Pieroni recounts that in the years after the opening, many people from the region would head to the *Autogrill* to stock up on delicacies. By the late 1960s, the shelves in the spaces above the highway in Montepulciano boasted “rare goods” that were still unobtainable in the small grocery stores in the town. For many people from the region, which had remained largely undeveloped until well into the sixties, it would have been the first time in their lives they had seen an elevator.

Another journalist, Alessandro Benetti, writes in an article on the demolition of this rest stop in the architecture magazine *Domus* that this construction hovering above the traffic was a “milestone”. “A place with a hint of America, which allowed people to dream in an age in which freedom was inextricably linked with the automobile.”

However the word *Autogrill* goes back some fifteen years before the opening of the building in Montepulciano. It is the year 1952, seven years have gone by since the end of the Second World War and the definitive overthrow of the fascist rule of dictator Benito Mussolini. In a referendum held on 2 June 1946, Italians voted in favour of abolishing the

the monarchy and establishing a republic. In 1948, after the first parliamentary elections, the government led by the anti-fascist and Christian Democrat Alcide De Gasperi made it clear which side they were taking in the Cold War: they stood with the West, on the side of the USA, and with NATO, of which Italy was a member since the organisation's founding in April 1949. At this time, Italy was a poor country marked by widespread poverty and deep political divisions. But anybody who travelled across the country at that time would have also seen signs of economic renewal.

One of these signs was a single-storey building that was opened in 1952 along one of the few highways in the country: located between Turin and Milan, near the town of Novara in the northern Italian region of Piedmont. Inside this building is a store where drivers can stop for biscuits, with a restaurant beside it. The man behind this attraction is Mario Pavesi, an entrepreneur who has lived in the town of Novara since the 1930s, where he owns a biscuit factory. The Pavesini biscuits in the shape of a dog bone are one of the most popular confectionery products in postwar Italy. “È sempre l'ora dei Pavesini” – it's always time for Pavesini, goes one of the most successful advertising slogans ever to have been penned in the Italian language.

Like many Italian entrepreneurs of his generation, Pavesi was totally infatuated with the USA. During a trip to the States in the 1940s, he was quite taken by the *grill rooms* he saw there: restaurants for drivers along the interstate highways that connected the different states of the country. Pavesi first began selling his wares on the side of a highway all the way back in 1947. He opened his first store in Novara, where he sold the biscuits produced in his own factory, with an American-style “bar” next to it, along with tables and a pergola outside. He made sure it could be seen from the road by erecting a concrete arch looming above the landscape with dozen flags on poles sticking out of it, and a big neon sign reading “Pavesini” on the side. Ever the entrepreneur, Pavesi then expanded the place to include a restaurant. Above the now impressive building was a sign reading “Bar-Autogrill-Restaurant Pavesini

biscuits”. By 1958, alongside the rapid expansion of his biscuit business, Pavesi had added three more *Autogrills* to accompany this first building of its kind.

In the late 1950s, Italians – particularly in the north and the centre of the country – experienced the most spectacular period of economic growth in the nation’s history: *il boom economico*. For millions of Italians, this upswing enabled them to put a refrigerator and a washing machine in their apartment for the first time and to buy their own car. A car that allowed them to traverse the country with increasing pace and ease every year. The network of *autostrade* grew denser and denser, and the *Autogrill* became an essential part of the planning. When planners were mapping out the 750-kilometre-long A1 highway, the Autostrada del Sole between Milan and Naples, rest stops were pencilled in every 40 kilometres. In 1961, with the passing of the Zaccagnini Act, the Italian parliament founded the Società Autostrade, legally obliging the organisation to construct hundreds of kilometres of additional highway.

For oil companies and the Italian food industry, the plan to create dozens of new rest stops sparks the emergence of a business model of gigantic proportions. Pavesi is not the only pioneer looking to earn money along the highways. Two other growing giants of the Italian food industry also throw their hats in the ring: Motta and Alemagna.

Angelo Motta opened a bakery under his family name in 1919, where he made some tweaks to a traditional cake called a *panettone*, managing to gradually establish it as the national Christmas cake. Motta opened more branches, and in the 1930s, the bakery’s production methods were industrialised and the business went public. By 1957, when Angelo Motta passed away, Motta had long been producing a wide variety of sweet baked goods and ice cream, as well as crackers, a product that had just arrived in the country from the USA. At this time, the public limited company Motta SpA had some 3,600 employees and sold its wares in 70,000 stores. Motta made up for almost 10 per cent of the turnover of the entire

Italian food industry and 7 per cent of the advertising spending. It was from this position of strength that the company decided to enter the roadside rest stop market.

Motta could not use the name *Autogrill* because Pavesi had registered the name as a trademark after opening his first location in Novara. But the company, now managed by Alberto Ferrante, came up with an easy alternative, opening the first *Mottagrill* in 1960. Somaglia ovest is located on the A1, near the northern Italian city of Piacenza. With its glass façades and metal struts, the construction resembled an enormous greenhouse.

Alemagna, the third rest stop company, became Motta's fiercest rival in the 1950s. When, during the lead-up to the festive season, Motta came up with the slogan "It's not Christmas without Motta", Alemagna responded with "It's spelt Christmas, but it's pronounced 'Alemagna'". In the novel *La bella di Lodi*, set against the backdrop of the Italian economic miracle, the protagonist Roberta hires Alemagna to cater a buffet at the family's elegant residence.

As Simone Colafranceschi explains in his book *Autogrill: Una storia italiana*, for the executives of Alemagna, joining Pavesi and Motta in the highway rest stop business was a natural choice. The Alemagna branches were much more restrained than those of their competition: their *Autobars* were mostly prefabricated buildings, with the dining area and the service station housed under the one roof.

During this era, the *Autogrills*, *Mottagrills* and *Autobars* spread like wildfire. The rest stops are overrun, the constantly swelling mass of car owners in an increasingly wealthy Italy are drawn to these buildings like tourist attractions. From 1961 to 1962, the turnover of the *Autogrills*, *Mottagrills* and *Autobars* along the section of the A1 between Milan and Florence grows by a spectacular 82 per cent. In *La bella di Lodi*, Arbasino describes the "unbelievable Sunday crowds" that flood into an *Autogrill* and buy "all sorts of things: shopping carts full of glittering packaging with stuffed animals, basket bags, Martian helmets, go-kart helmets,

Etruscan amphorae, glow-in-the-dark sand buckets, meowing teddy bears, windbreakers for the front and back windows shaped like crocodiles, and plastic flowers for the family party”.

The highway rest stops became sites of pilgrimage for millions. With church dignitaries issuing blessings to the hungry consumers of a then still deeply Catholic Italy. When the Cantagallo *Mottagrill* opened on 29 April 1961 on the A1 highway near Bologna (the largest rest stop in Italy at the time), the ceremony was attended not only by the state secretary for education Giovanni Elkan, Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro, the archbishop of Bologna, was also in attendance. Cantagallo is a bridge rest stop, with structures on either side of the road and a long, elevated section joining the two. All up, it is 70 metres long, 13 metres wide, with 70,000 square metres of floor space, and 150 employees working in three shifts to serve customers 24 hours a day.

At the opening festivities, Cardinal Lercaro compared the gigantic *Mottagrill* to an inn on the road to Jerusalem mentioned by Jesus in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Lercaro continued: “And now we have asked the Lord to bestow his blessing upon this rest stop. Which is so much bigger and more beautiful but is still in need of the hard work of the people and the blessing of God.” Words that reflect the strategy of the Catholic church in Italy at the time: the church leaders, who were cosy with the ruling Christian Democrats, gave their blessing to the burgeoning consumer society because they saw the joys it provided as the most powerful prophylactic against communism – which, given the enduring popularity of the largest communist party in Western Europe at the time, it viewed as the most terrifying of all spectres.

Bridge rest stops like Cantagallo – and the one at Montepulciano mentioned at the beginning of the chapter – are the most spectacular representations of how starkly the wave of modernisation in Italian society at the time was mirrored in the country’s highway rest stops. Known as *Autogrills/Mottagrills a ponte*, they bore witnesses to the “epoch in which they were created”, writes architecture journalist Alessandro Benetti for *Domus*, describing the era

as “bolder than it was rigorous, more frenetic than it was prudent.” The architect Angelo Bianchetti alone designed another ten of these buildings for Pavesi. One of these was an extension of the very first *Autogrill*, with the rest stop in Novara becoming an *Autogrill a ponte* in 1962. Over the following decade, Pavesi and Motta went on to build almost a dozen other bridge rest stops.

But during the years in which these buildings arose as the most powerful symbols of the Golden era of the rest stop, the foundations of this Italian economic miracle had already started to crumble. In 1963, economic growth in Italy began to slow and the unemployment rate began to climb. Two of the three food giants behind the *Autogrill* wave – Alemagna and Motta – move into other areas of business to increase sales, stocking everything from grissini to eggs and instant coffee. But sales of many of these new products are sluggish, putting pressure on profits. At Pavesi, the company that invented the *Autogrill*, the family of company founder Mario Pavesi began to lose control over the course of the enterprise. Industrial giant Edison gradually increased its share holdings until it became the majority shareholder. Edison then merged with the Montecatini Group, and like Alemagna and Motta, Pavesi became a part of one of Italy’s great industrial dynasties.

This era also marks the highpoint of the *borghesia di stato* (literally the “bourgeoisie of the state”). After the founding of the state-owned national electricity provider Enel in 1962, large, state-owned companies took control of great swathes of the Italian economy. One of these was the state-owned Società Meridionale di Elettricità, SME for short, a subsidiary of the national reconstruction organisation Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale. SME bought into the Italian food industry – snapping up shares in Alemagna, Motta and Pavesi, among other companies. By the mid-1960s, SME had secured ownership of between 35 and 50 per cent of the shares of these three companies. But while the Italian state was increasingly becoming an entrepreneur, the ruling coalitions of the time were unable to come up with anything resembling an intelligent approach to industrial policies.

With the decade of dizzying growth over, the companies behind the highway rest stops underwent profound changes. But for the time being at least, the cash registers of the *Autogrills*, *Mottagrills* and *Autobars* continued to tick over. Business continued to grow by an average of about 10 per cent a year up until 1973. The number of car owners continued to grow, which meant so did the customer base – and during this era, the annual amount of highway being constructed in Italy was significantly more than in West Germany or France.

The year 1971 even saw the construction of the first bridge rest stop in Alfaterna, in the comparatively weaker economy of the south of Italy. It was a hulking, multi-storey building with a motel inside, where guests could spend the night overlooking the lanes of the highway between Naples and Salerno. After Alfaterna – that is, after 1971 – not a single new bridge rest stop would be constructed in Italy.

1973 was the end of the golden era. In this year, Italy (along with the rest of the Western world) was hit by the most severe economic crisis since the end of the war: in the wake of the Yom-Kippur War, the major Arab oil producers slowed production, causing fuel prices to skyrocket.

Like in West Germany and Switzerland, the Italian government decreed car-free Sundays. The government in Rome largely halted its expansion of the highway network and switched to a course of austerity and budget cuts. *Autogrill*, *Mottagrill* and *Autobar* were left without customers. Sales figures nosedived, while staff costs rose significantly.

The state-owned SME came up with a bail-out plan for highway rest stops consisting of staff cuts and savings in the field of service: shifting to vending machines and order-at-the-counter restaurants instead of liveried waiters who brought the *primo* and *secondo* to the table. Restaurants located on stretches of highway with little traffic were sold off. But it wasn't enough. In the mid-1970s, Alemagna and Motta, these two emblems of the Italian boom years, were plunged into a crisis that threatened their very survival. The companies began divesting from the highway rest stop business.

In 1977, a new company was founded that bundled together all the Alemagna, Motta and Pavese highway rest stops: Autogrill SpA, an entity belonging to a public limited company that was largely under state control, and the largest hospitality company in Italy. With this, Autogrill transformed from a brand name into a company. This organisation was tasked with leading the 278 rest stops they own out of the crisis.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, these efforts were largely unsuccessful. Between 1973 and 1984, the annual inflation rate in Italy never dipped below 10 per cent. The income of many families evaporated – and with it, the budget that many people were able to spend when they stopped in at an Autogrill. During this time, fires also destroyed two particularly famous bridge rest stops: In 1981, the largest bridge rest stop at Cantagallo, and in 1984, the very first *Autogrill* at Novara.

In 1984, however, Italy entered the beginning of what several authors have called the “second economic miracle”: after years of economic growth wallowing around 2.5 per cent, figures picked up, and by 1987, Italy had climbed to fifth place among the list of the world’s largest economies, with hundreds of kilometres of highway being built in the country.

Autogrill’s management came up with a new identity for the highway rest stops, but did so gently, as befits a notoriously nostalgic country like Italy. The Autogrill logo used from 1977 to 1996 – a red triangle made up of three intertwined arrows – stood for the old three rest stop pioneers of Alemagna, Motta and Pavese. Until the early 1990s, the rest stops still bore the names of these three companies, and the names were still used in advertising campaigns. At the same time, though, Autogrill gave its rest stops a face lift. It standardised the design and established modern, self-service restaurants, creating sub-brands such as the fast-food pizza chain Spizzico, giving its panini unmistakable Autogrill names and items such as the Camogli, Rustichella and Apollo became iconic products that people were all too happy to interrupt their long drives for.

Autogrill was privatised in 1994, and was floated in 1997. The new company leadership transformed it within a few years into the most powerful global player in travel hospitality. And the company has continued to expand since the turn of the millennium, breaking into the markets in Switzerland, Austria, the USA and Vietnam. In 2023, Autogrill merged with the Swiss company Dufry, forming Avolta AG. According to its own figures, the Autogrill Group now owns some 3,300 restaurants worldwide, from the aperitif bar on the Piazza Duomo in Milan to the airport restaurant on the Indonesian island of Bali.

However, in the minds of most people in Italy, the *Autogrill* is still a place on the highway. A place familiar to anyone and everyone, conjuring up memories, emotions, sometimes feelings of deep-seated longing. For people in Italy, the company logo that has been in use since 1996 – a stylized A with the line through the middle resembling a truncated Nike swoosh – is at least as familiar as the big arches of McDonald's is in the rest of the world. "Some nights, when all the bars are closed / someone will still be partying at the next *Autogrill*" goes a line from the 1995 rock anthem "Certe notti" by singer-songwriter Ligabue. And among the generation of Italians born since 1975, the number of people who can sing along to this song is probably about the same as those who can sing the national anthem.

The expression "mi fermo in autogrill" (with emphasis on the last syllable) simply means: I'm getting off the highway and taking a break at a rest stop – whether it's in Prenestina Ovest, Angath Nord or Frankenwald West. "Autogrill" is a brand name that is used as a common noun, like "Scotch" tape for sticky tape, or "Kleenex" for tissues.

There are still a good 200 Autogrills, (rest stops belonging to the company of the same name) along Italy's highways. But in some regions, drivers today will pass by a handful of green road signs advertising Fini, Sarni, Chef Express or Ristop branches before they see a "real" Autogrill that actually belongs to the company of the same name.

The number of these Autogrills is likely to drop even more in the coming years. "Targeted investment in a smaller number of branches in order to increase profitability" is

how the company itself has defined its strategy for the Italian highway market – the market where it all began. As elsewhere, the number of people driving long stretches on the highway is decreasing. It is unlikely that the *autostrade* will ever see the kind of growth rates that were common during the years of the economic miracle.

After the Montepulciano bridge rest stop was wrenched from the landscape in 2021, two smaller Autogrills have appeared on both sides of the A1. Modern and efficient buildings with lattice steel and LED installations in the roofs.

The very first *autogrill*, the one in Novara, has since changed hands. The rival company Chef Express has had the bridge rest stop rebuilt and has been operating it since 2017. When it was opened by the new operator, the local news portal *Prima Novara* quoted Gianni Luciani, the head of the highway company SATAP, on the development: “I’ve found it quite difficult to stop calling them *autogrills*.”

***Passaparola* – Word of Mouth:**

Perhaps no other book captures the spirit of the era of the Italian economic miracle better than *La bella di Lodi*. What with Alberto Arbasino's fast-paced diction and his no-frills, lively descriptions of places, people and ways of thinking – and with its snapshots of the life of a restless country on the rise. Numerous scenes in *La bella di Lodi* take place in and around *autogrills*: buildings characterised by a previously unseen architectural modernity, in which people who have risen from crushing poverty are able to combine their desire for consumerism with their desire for the automobile and the open road. The unromantic and starkly physical love story between Roberta, the rich and brash daughter of a factory farmer from northern Italy and the uneducated mechanic Franco was made into a film by director Mario Missiroli in 1963. You can find *La bella di Lodi*, with Stefania Sandrelli as the female lead, on online streaming platforms with English subtitles. Lovers of the aesthetics of *Autogrill* rest stops and of *Autogrill* products from the present and from years gone by should follow the Instagram profiles @passione_autogrill and @nostalgiautogrill on Instagram.