

# FOOD BIZ Move over, Red Bull

by James Scalzitti

Even the craving for all things Italian has gone global, the booming energy drink market has not had an Italian-branded product ... until now.

Two drinks — Brava Italia and Sexy Italia — are taking their place as THE Italian energy drinks, but they're also much more than that.

The impetus for Brava Italia, the firstborn of the two, came with the Italian World Cup win in 2006, according to Salerno Imports President Ron Salerno. Its Genova producer has been importing foods into Italy for the past four decades, and with the Italian World Cup victory, they saw just how strong the global demand for Italian products was. At the same time, the energy drink market was taking off, and they realized there was no Italian drink of this sort.

Thus, Brava Italia was born, and its ascent has been remarkable. In the first six months of sales, Brava Italia sold three million cans in Italy. It is now the No. 2 energy drink in Italy, and with its newborn sister drink, Sexy Italia, it's making its move onto American shelves.

The two drinks would be enough for Italian Americans and Italophiles to get excited over if they were nothing more than Italian-branded energy drinks, but they set themselves apart in taste and image.

Brava Italia is a "specialty Italian drink," and not necessarily a competitor to the rest of the

energy drink pack. This, Salerno explains, gives the Italian deli, pizzeria or food shop owner "a chance to participate in the energy drink market ... but it's also something especially for them."

Brilliant. So besides folks on their way to the gym, sleepy-eyed office workers and night clubbers, Brava Italia and Sexy Italia will go hand-in-hand with those who are clutching a Prada key-fob or Dolce & Gabbana cell phone in the other hand.

Salerno has no reservations about putting these drinks up against the 800-pound bovine in the energy drink room, because he knows people will prefer the taste of Brava and Sexy Italia to Red Bull. People have told Salerno repeatedly they simply prefer the taste of Brava and Sexy Italia to that of Red Bull, and taste tests have proven that an overwhelming majority of people agree.

That's no mistake. Brava Italia is a proprietary formula made to taste pleasant, unlike the slightly medicinal-tasting Red Bull. It was made for everyone in every environment. Sexy

Italia, on the other hand, unabashedly loves the nightlife.

"It's an energy drink that has three added ingredients — guarana, ginseng and damiana — which are said to have an aphrodisiac effect," Salerno says. Additionally, "it was specifically designed to mix and blend well in cocktails."

At the Bartolotta Ristorante in the Wynn Las Vegas hotel, for instance, Paul Bartolotta's mixologist, Drew D'Errico, has developed the restaurant's own unique drinks incorporating Sexy Italia.

The drinks are getting some pretty high-profile exposure. Brava Italia is the official energy drink of the New Jersey Ironmen indoor soccer team, and is sold in their home, Newark's Prudential Center. In April, Brava Italia sponsored an exhibition soccer match at the Prudential Center that featured Italian calcio superstars Roberto Baggio and Gianluca Pagliuca. Other marketing efforts include a presence at L.A.'s and New York's fashion weeks, as well as sponsorship of shows by designer Jared Gold.

According to analyst estimates, energy drinks are expected to be a \$10 billion business by 2010. And there's plenty of room to grow for an energetic company with a unique product. "Let (the big names) fight it out," Salerno says, and Brava/Sexy Italia will carve out their niche. And a comfortable niche in a \$10 billion market sounds pretty good.

