



Eataly: Retail on a Mission

by Jessica Bicknell

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"EAT. SHOP. LEARN. This is a store with stories. Here, you won't just discover what you love, you'll also learn about what you love." Eataly Manifesto

Let's say you want to start a museum about the wonders of Italian cuisine. You would want people to really be able to experience the food—touch it, smell it, eat it, purchase it—while also learning about it. You might create labels about the importance of some of these foods to Italian tradition and culture, as well as invite visitors to take in stories of how and where the foods are made. You might try to immerse visitors in a certain kind of environment. This place exists, although it's not a museum. It's a marketplace. It's a restaurant. It's Eataly.

What is Eataly?

Eataly, they say, is the largest artisanal Italian food and wine marketplace in the world, but is perhaps best described as one foodie website puts it: "a 50,000 sf Italian Culinary Funhouse." Home to just about every kind of Italian edible you would want to consume, it's roughly organized by types of food (one area containing an espresso bar, desserts, chocolates, candies, and jams, another area devoted to the butcher, not to be confused with the charcuterie and cheese area). Add to this glorified supermarket layout a couple of restaurants, a wine bar, a gift shop, tons of people, and locate it in Manhattan, and you'll start to get an idea of the place.

The most interesting thing for museum types is perhaps the labeling—the place is littered with labels. The website explains: "Eataly is MORE than a supermarket with restaurants. Our signs will give you the story behind every product we sell and serve, illuminating the vignettes that make Italian food culture so full of personality and warmth." The result is that you can't pass a package of spaghetti without coming across a label that tells you how it was made, where

it's from, and who made it, which, admittedly, is kind of cool. It's even part of the Eataly Manifesto (yes, there's a manifesto):

EAT. SHOP. LEARN.

This is a store with stories. Here, you won't just discover what you love, you'll also learn about what you love.

Eataly doesn't claim to be a museum of food, but has definitely cultivated for itself a museum-like aura. Many retail environments have used museum- and exhibition-like techniques to help sell their brand, enhance the shopping experience, and sometimes even to educate (such as the Apple Store with its merchandise-as-art displays and "Genius Bar" to learn about products, and American Girl Place, which uses historical dioramas to convey the time periods of the dolls). Eataly, however, seems to go a step further with its learning mission.

What Eataly Offers Visitors

In addition to things commonly found in both retail and museum environments, such as a cafe (in this case many cafes), well-informed salespeople (interpreters), a bookstore and gift shop, Eataly has:

A "curated" collection of culturally important items

Celebrity chefs Mario Batali and Lidia Bastianich have hand-chosen all the items there for their quality, importance, and value to Italian cooking. Beyond just merchandise, you get the feeling that these foods are an important part of Italian culture.

Labels with stories, related to a mission

If you are in the exhibition business, this is likely the first thing you notice when you

enter Eataly. There must be hundreds of labels throughout the store, some stretching up to the ceiling. The labels tell varied stories about the food—some about the region the foods are made or originated in, some about the people who prepare the food, and others about the brands and the commitment to quality/authenticity from those brands. They also have quotes like this one from Sophia Loren: “Everything you see I owe to pasta.”

Solicitation of visitor feedback

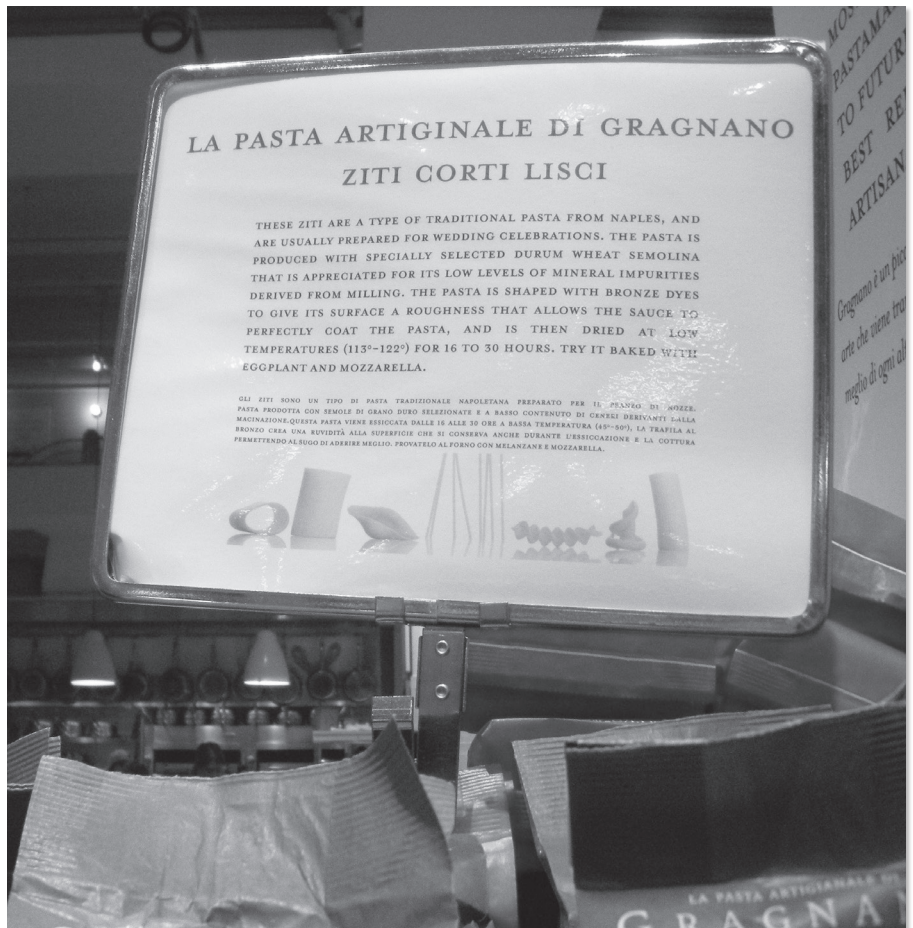
There seems to be more of a push for this here than found in other stores. Like any store that wants to stay in business, Eataly vows to stock more of what people buy, less of what they don't over time, but there are also comment cards that you can fill out when you leave.

Classes/Programming

You can sign up for cooking lessons at “La Scuola,” which is advertised as “intimate classes each handcrafted by Chef Lidia Bastianich.” Offerings include a class where you can learn about and how to cook with “farm-to-table” ingredients, a class where you can learn to speak Italian while you enjoy various Italian meals, and a class about regional cuisines and cultures. The quote from the class description states: “We love food and crave more knowledge about its origins. Some classes will be health-focused, while others will provide sociological context and scientific snippets. Trips outside the classroom will offer a new perspective on what and why we eat.”

Visitors

Eataly purposefully calls its guests “visitors” instead of “customers.” This adds to the overall sense that it’s marketing itself as a place more about seeing/learning than consuming.



A typical interpretive graphic at Eataly. Courtesy of Jessica Bicknell.

What Museums Can Learn From Eataly

Since offering a better guest experience is something that both museums and retail environments strive for, there are some tactics Eataly uses that museums might take under consideration and vice versa.

For instance, within Eataly, you get a feeling of immersion, food-wise but also language-wise, which is pretty effective. Almost every sign is in both English and Italian. You can purchase an Italian newspaper with your espresso to “practice your Italian or pretend you are in Italy.” This immersive interpretive messaging is inherent in every aspect of the complex, from displays to the cafes to the gift shop.

They integrate messaging throughout the complex. There is a big push to identify regions where certain foods originate (if there is a Big Idea within Eataly, this might be it). To this end, the store features a different region of Italy each month—for instance if the region is

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Just a few of Eataly's many signs. Courtesy of Jessica Bicknell.

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Lazio, the special pizza, wine, cheese, and other foodstuffs throughout the store will be from that region. This includes a changeable kiosk in the middle of the complex that features key sights of the region, and regional cuisine, paired with travel advertising in case you want to plan a trip. These are just some of the attempts to draw you deeper into Italian culture by using the food as a hook.

Finally, when it comes to interpreting food, Eataly has the advantage of being made for food. In this way, Eataly has the potential for making learning a totally sensory experience. This is something many institutions have started striving for and that Eataly has the potential to do well.

What Eataly Can Learn From Museums

Having said this, the signs are too numerous and therefore ineffective: a friend I was with noticed them, but didn't read a single one. There was just too much going on. There is little that invites people to really linger over

the interpretation, and as such it wasn't really designed for learning. Basically, this is a retail environment that has been retrofitted to include interpretive signage. There are no places to sit if you aren't in one of the cafes.

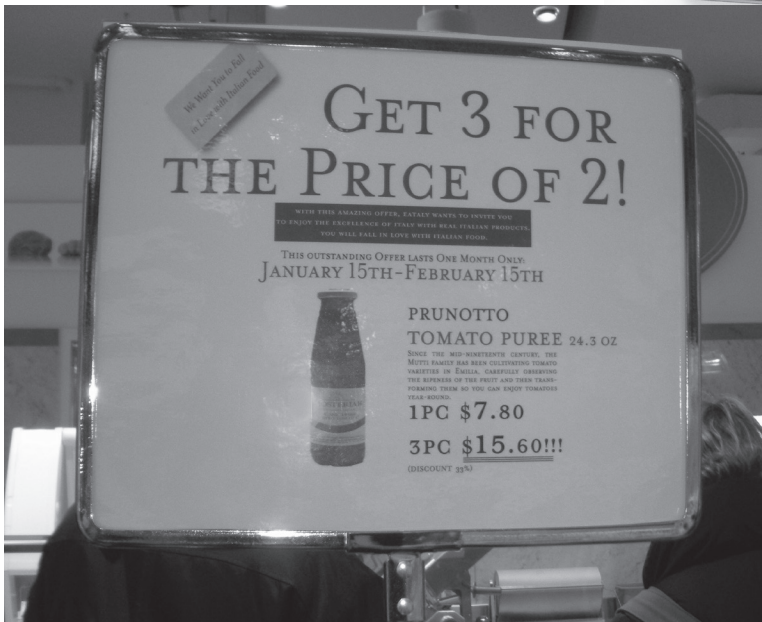
If the creators are serious about the learning part of their mission, they could use an educator, environmental graphic designer, exhibit developer, or other exhibition design professional. Eataly is incredibly overwhelming, due to the sheer numbers: of people, foodstuffs, and wordy labels. As far as the labels go, the narrative is inconsistent, there is no hierarchy of information, and text is hard to read. If the proprietors truly want people to learn in their shop, they could do more to make people comfortable and the materials accessible. Things that museums have learned through years of evaluation could benefit the educational efforts of places like Eataly.

Museum-Like Stores, Store-Like Museums

Eataly is a "mash-up" of many things. This



A banner shares Eataly's core message, but is far too hard to read. Courtesy of Jessica Bicknell.



Some of the signs within Eataly have nothing to do with learning. Courtesy of Jessica Bicknell.

for-profit environment is using museum-like elements to increase the authenticity of its brand and to create more of an experience for its “visitors.” The enterprise expects a minimum of four million of them every year, and they’re not alone. Eataly is just one of an increasing number of storefronts that seem to be expanding to include informal learning in their brand/mission, from local bike shops giving maintenance lessons to cyclists to City Winery offering winemaking classes. Informal learning may be becoming a selling point.

The flip side of this is that many museums are expanding their retail storefronts and cafes in an attempt to increase revenue to serve their missions. In some places there is a push to call visitors “customers” so we think more about selling them an experience than being a place they come to visit. It will be interesting to see

what the future holds as museums and retail environments continue to borrow strategies from one another to increase revenue and strengthen their brands, respectively.

There seems to be a continuum of informal learning out there, and places like Eataly can give us some idea of what makes museums so distinct. It’s not the labels, the mission, the collection, but a combination of these things, along with the service to society that makes museums necessary and unique. Still, there may be a place for Eataly somewhere along the spectrum of informal learning environments. If you want to explore the science of food you’d visit a science museum; if you want to learn about the history of food you might make your way to a history museum; but if you want a place to learn about the food itself, maybe you go to Eataly. ✨

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