

SELF

Solo-entrepreneurship in post-pandemic Europe

Mapping and Extrapolating solo-entrepreneurship trends & features

Country Snapshot: Italy

Developed by: EDUCatt & IDP

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Introduction

Based on findings, please provide an overview on your report. Try to be as concise and straight to the point as possible.

(1 page max)

There have always been several ways of doing entrepreneurship, in particular in Italy, where a large number of small and medium-sized enterprises have been run often by families¹. Italy therefore can be classified as a small business economy country where microenterprises represent 95% of the national economy and yet they are the most burdened in terms of GDP and employment. The main actors in support of entrepreneurship and development are the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), the Ministry of Economic Development as well as the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies².

According to the research findings, solo self-employment is a growing phenomenon in most advanced economies. Despite that, it is also a field under-researched in the majority of the EU nations. In Italy, self-entrepreneurship is gaining ground in the business landscape, with more and more individuals choosing to embark on a personal entrepreneurial activity. According to the GEM survey (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Survey) involving 46 countries in 2023, Italy is one of the countries with the lowest entrepreneurial propensity and also among the countries where the gap between the entrepreneurial propensity of the population and the actual activation of new enterprises is widest.

From the research paper, it has been found that the unfavorable environment recorded in Italy with regard to the speed of authorizations and taxation for businesses and poor or weak preparation on the skills among young people play a relevant role in the decision to initiate a new business activity. In Italy, there is a high percentage of skill gaps and mismatches between the labor market and the business world, as well as digital illiteracy among the majority. Therefore, fostering entrepreneurial thinking and enhancing skills as early as possible is a key element for creating the right environment for the flourishing of successful companies. Entrepreneurship education should be promoted in primary education and continued in secondary and tertiary education as well as at the university level. That would develop the right mindset to sponsor individual initiatives and self-employment. A special focus on the new digital and green skills is required by new enterprises, therefore entrepreneurship education should be future-proof and more responsive to the rapid changes and evolving needs. Supporting teachers with new methods of teaching also by the support of digital resources and online platforms can be of utter importance, as well as new ways of engaging young people and students in entrepreneurial activities.

¹ GEM - Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Attitudes. 2023. Last viewed 28 May 2024: <https://shorturl.at/qP5U2>.

² Solopreneur. Self-employability in Remote Regions of Europe- Final Report. https://www.solopreneur.eu/docs/SOLOPRENEUR_IO2_Report_Final.pdf. p.13.

Quantitative indicators on solo entrepreneurship and self-employment in Italy

Based on findings, please provide for all the available quantitative indicators on solo entrepreneurship and self-employment in your country. Guiding points might be:

- *Historic evolution of the phenomenon (e.g., pre and post pandemic)*
- *Spatial distribution (i.e., per region, North VS South, etc.)*
- *Gender / generational connotations*
- *Statistics (insert graphs and/or diagrams): please insert any statistics you have available. If own generated, please insert the excel object (easy to translate if needed).*
- *Any other relevant quantitative reference*

Please always quote the source and list the source in the references (see also the bibliography file in Excel)

Solo self-employment is a growing phenomenon in most advanced economies³, nonetheless, it is also the most under-researched form of self-employment in all the EU nations⁴. In Italy, self-entrepreneurship is gaining ground in the business landscape, with more and more individuals choosing to embark on a personal entrepreneurial activity⁵. This trend offers the prospect of both personal and professional fulfillment but also requires adequate financial support and the right tools, education, and training to realize entrepreneurial ambitions⁶.

In Italy, the policy focus on entrepreneurship has emerged since the 1990s, following an earlier emphasis on small business policies, and has evolved over the last three decades through broad support for innovative start-ups, while at the same time pursuing parallel support for equal opportunities in entrepreneurship across all population groups and types of geographical areas⁷. The 21st century has shown a drive towards digital innovation that reshaped the self-employment landscape in Italy. The COVID-19 pandemic has potentially accelerated and exacerbated certain trends with a record of more individuals considering self-employment as a viable career path in front of uncertainty in the traditional job market⁸.

Despite this, the GEM survey (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Survey) involving 46 countries in 2023 shows Italy as one of the countries with the lowest entrepreneurial propensity. Italy is also among the countries where the gap between the entrepreneurial propensity of the population and the actual activation of new enterprises is widest. The country has one of the lowest levels in the TEA Indicator (Total Early-stage Entrepreneurship Activity Indicator), in fact out of 46 economies in the world in 2023, Italy ranks 36th.

Looking at the historic evolution of the phenomenon, the COVID-19 pandemic, which spread globally starting in early 2020, had undoubtedly a significant impact on economic activity⁹. For a long period, following the 2008-2009 financial crisis, Italy was at the bottom of the international league table for the entrepreneurial vivacity of the population. Subsequently, there was a gradual though not constant recovery until 2015, when the TEA returned close to pre-crisis values (around 5%). Starting in 2016, a slow decline in the indicator began until the

³ Boeri, Tito, Giulia Giupponi, Alan B. Krueger, and Stephen Machin. "Solo Self-Employment and Alternative Work Arrangements: A Cross-Country Perspective on the Changing Composition of Jobs." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* no. 34 (2020): 170-95.

⁴ Miroslava Knapkova. "Dependent self-employment – Italy as a good practice example". "Ekonomika spoločnosť" (2022).

⁵ Baldacci, R. "Chi vuole avviare un'impresa" Agenzia Formativa, Finanza agevolata, Guide, Consigli e Letture, Professioni e Carriere. Accessed April 26, 2024. <https://shorturl.at/ET234>.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ INAPP, Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche, Politiche di sostegno alla creazione di nuova impresa e accompagnamento alle start-up: analisi della normativa e delle misure nazionali e regionali. Working Paper no. 115. 2024, p.5.

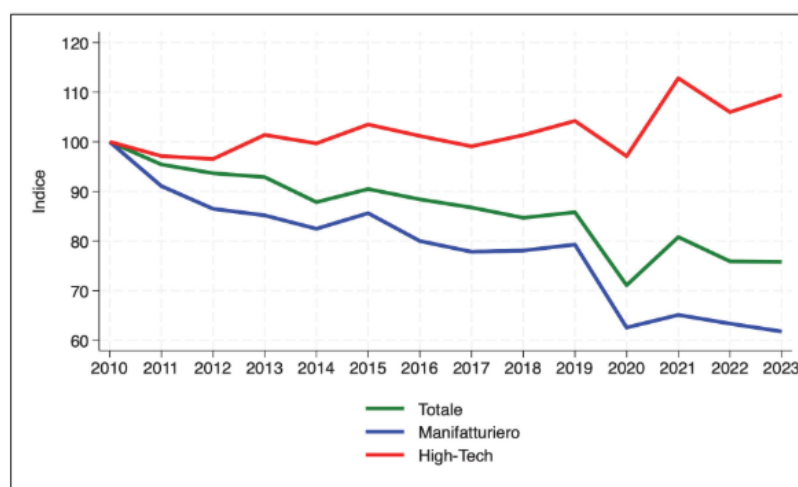
⁸ OECD (2024), Self-employed without employees (indicator). Last viewed: 28 May 2024. 10.1787/5d5d0d63-en.

⁹ *Ivi*, p.7.

sharp drop observed in 2019-2020¹⁰. In 2020, the lowest value of the entire period was reached. Since 2021, however, there has been an improvement, leading in 2022 to the highest TEA level which is further exceeded in 2023 (especially in the high-tech field, as in table 1). Despite the recovery in recent years, the level of entrepreneurial activity in Italy remains structurally low in comparison to what is observed in other industrialized countries and with a strongly pro-cyclical trend.

Compared with other countries, in Italy, there is a low level of entrepreneurial propensity in the over-45 age group and, in general, those more entrepreneurially active are the ones in the age group, 25-44¹¹. As far as entrepreneurial propensity is concerned, it increases significantly as education levels rise. So, researches show that a stronger commitment to entrepreneurship education in schools is also decisive in this phenomenon. A survey on the gender gap shows that, as in most advanced countries, entrepreneurial activation rates in Italy are significantly higher for men than for women. Men result to be more likely to be starting a new business than women (with roughly five men for every three women)¹². According to the assessment on the quality of social support specifically for women entrepreneurs and their access to resources compared to their counterparts made by the experts in the field of the new National Expert Survey (NES) Italy scored rather modestly on the former with the score of 3.1 and rank of 38th and slightly better for the latter 5.2 and 20th¹³. Despite those figures, the contribution of self-employment to employment growth is essential to reduce the gap in the female employment rate, for which Italy ranks among one of the last in the European Union¹⁴. Within this framework, Lombardia is the region that ranks among the best in terms of the presence of women entrepreneurs and self-employed workers, as well as being the region that offers the most opportunities in the country to start one's own business, followed by other regions in north-central Italy such as Emilia-Romagna, Veneto, Piemonte, Toscana, and Lazio¹⁵.

Figura 1 – Iscrizioni di nuove imprese in Italia (indici 2010 = 100)



Fonte: Elaborazioni su dati Movimprese

¹⁰ Micozzi, A. “L’attivazione imprenditoriale in Italia. Rapporto GEM 2023-2024” GEM – Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. (2024): p. 35.

¹¹ Casadei, M. & Finizio, M. L’Italia non è un Paese per imprese giovani: -6,6% sul 2019. Bolzano in controtendenza. 2023. Il Sole24.

¹² GEM. What is the National Expert Survey (NES)? Last viewed May 28, 2024. <https://shorturl.at/oR9rM>.

¹³ Confartigianato. Studi- 8 marzo/imprenditoria femminile, 5 regioni italiane nella top ten tra 233 regioni Ue: Lombardia (1°), Lazio (5°), Emilia-Romagna (8°), Piemonte e Veneto (9°). 2024. Last viewed 28 May 2024: <https://shorturl.at/TLfQh>.

¹⁴ ISTAT, Donne imprenditrici, più giovani e più istruite. 2024.

¹⁵ Unioncamere. Le regioni italiane più favorevoli all’imprenditoria giovanile. 2023. Last viewed 28 May 2024: <https://shorturl.at/X1i9T>.

Qualitative indicators on solo entrepreneurship and self-employment in Italy: skills-gap and needs assessments

Based on findings, please provide for a qualitative description of the solo entrepreneurship and self-employment' phenomenon in your country. In here please make sure to highlight:

- *Policy priorities in the field, if any*
- *Competence gaps of young aspiring solo entrepreneurs*
- *Education and training areas of interest to nurture the digital readiness and business acumen of aspiring self-employed people*

In this section you are kindly asked to provide us with clear competences' gaps and training needs that WP2 lead will look into to fill-in the learning outcomes matrix

Please always quote the source and list the source in the references (see also the bibliography file in Excel)

European and national policy interventions to create the right conditions for new business development and provide direct support to entrepreneurs and start-ups focus on overcoming specific obstacles such as financing, innovation, and skills¹⁶. The OECD¹⁷ emphasizes the need for targeted policy interventions to fully exploit the potential of entrepreneurship, both by creating favorable framework conditions for the development of new businesses and by providing direct support to overcome specific obstacles in areas such as finance, innovation, and skills.

Since 2016, it has been possible in Italy to access the 'ON -Oltre New Zero Tax Enterprises' funding opportunities, an incentive aimed at companies composed mainly of young people aged between 18 and 35 or women who want to become entrepreneurs. To date, 1319 projects have been financed through this initiative. The 'SELFIemployment' Fund is also active, which finances the start-up of small business initiatives promoted by young NEETs with interest-free loans. In particular, the Fund is managed by Invitalia within the framework of the Youth Guarantee Programme, under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies¹⁸. With specific regard to southern Italy, there is the 'Resto al Sud' initiative, the incentive that supports the establishment and development of new entrepreneurial and freelance activities in several Italian regions including Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Puglia, Sardinia, Sicily and in some areas of Lazio, Marche and Umbria. Additional resources for self-entrepreneurship, especially for young people, are usually provided by specific Regional Laws, i.e. by the so-called Regional Operational Programmes prepared for the implementation of actions financed by structural funds.

Among the competence gaps of young aspiring solo entrepreneurs highlighted from the research findings, one of the main capacities of an entrepreneur is, in fact, that of identifying and pursuing opportunities (the so called "opportunity recognition"). A vast literature has shown that the ability to recognize business opportunities does not depend so much on the 'presence' of these opportunities in the environment as on the entrepreneur's ability and willingness to take action to pursue them. According to this literature, opportunities are not 'found' but are 'constructed'¹⁹. The ability to recognize opportunities thus refers to subjective rather than contextual factors²⁰. The majority's perception of mastering the knowledge and skills to become an entrepreneur has a decreasing

¹⁶ INAPP, Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche, Politiche di sostegno alla creazione di nuova impresa e accompagnamento alle start-up: analisi della normativa e delle misure nazionali e regionali. Working Paper no. 115, p.5.

¹⁷ OECD, "OECD Economic Surveys European Union and Euro Area". (2023).

¹⁸ Cliclavoro. "Autoimprenditoria". Accessed April 26, 2024. <https://shorturl.at/ewQVX>. /.

¹⁹ Ardichvili, A. & Cardozo, R. "A Theory of Entrepreneurial Opportunity Identification and Development", Journal of Business Venturing, Jg. 18, S. 105-123, p. 113.

²⁰ Micozzi, A. "L'attivazione imprenditoriale in Italia. Rapporto GEM 2023-2024" GEM – Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. (2024): p. 29.

trend in Italy and in general, both in the case of men and women, the percentages recorded are lower than in EU countries. These perceptions are undoubtedly exacerbated by a generally unfavorable environment with regard to the speed of authorizations and taxation for businesses and poor or weak preparation on the skills needed to start a business, especially by those individuals who do not have a network of knowledge in the field (such as family members already entrepreneurs)²¹. In Italy, in fact, there is a high percentage of skill gaps and mismatches between the labor market and the business world, as well as digital illiteracy among the majority.

Therefore, fostering entrepreneurial thinking and enhancing skills as early as possible is a key element for creating the right environment for the flourishing of successful companies. Entrepreneurship education should be promoted in primary education and continued in secondary and tertiary education as well as at the university level and be focused not only on the theoretical side but also on the practical one. Young people should be trained to be able to understand the market, and the economic environment with its opportunities, expand their networking, and be able to attract investors²². That would develop the right mindset to sponsor individual initiatives and self-employment. A special focus on the new digital and green skills is required by new enterprises, therefore entrepreneurship education should be future-proof and more responsive to the rapid changes and evolving needs²³.

²¹ Rocha, V., Grilli, L. Early-stage start-up hiring: the interplay between start-ups' initial resources and innovation orientation. *Small Bus Econ* 62, 1641–1668 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-023-00818-7>.

²² Hatthakijphong P & Ting, H. Prioritizing successful entrepreneurial skills: An emphasis on the perspectives of entrepreneurs versus aspiring entrepreneurs. 2019. Elsevier – Thinking skills and creativity. Vol. 34.

²³ Guerra, Valentina. “SMEunited addresses young entrepreneurs in Italy”, SME UNITED Crafts & SMEs in Europe, 2022. Accessed April 27, 2024. <https://shorturl.at/hvxD6>.

Opportunities: training available and operational tools

Based on findings, please provide for any input/information/data on the following:

- *Is solo entrepreneurship and self-employed addressed at country level from an education and training perspective? If not, what do you think is the main reason?*
- *Are there structured and established training programmes at HE level tailored on solo-entrepreneurship?*
- *Are there evidences supporting solo entrepreneurship and self-employment as a priority/area of interest in your national HE ecosystem?*

Please also provide to insert here at least 3 case studies/best practices or example, policies or initiatives in support.

Please always quote the source and list the source in the references (see also the bibliography file in Excel)

It is undoubtedly that qualities such as the spirit of initiative, problem-solving, and creativity can play a relevant role in all aspects of work and daily life in general²⁴. The level of competitiveness, as well as economic growth and innovation of Europe, depends on being able to grow future capable leaders with the right skills, behavior and attitude to be entrepreneurial and simultaneously act in a socially responsible manner²⁵. Education and more specifically the right entrepreneurship learning, therefore, is of utter importance in developing an entrepreneurial mindset and behavior. Education can help affect and develop young people's entrepreneurial skills and abilities, and in general, can support them in becoming more aware of their entrepreneurial abilities and opportunities. On that account, a lack of resources to assist entrepreneurship learning and guidance appears to be a relevant and delicate issue.

In Italy, it seems that there is no national strategy for entrepreneurship education²⁶. Despite this lack, in the context of the promotion of lifelong learning, it has been introduced into the Italian legal system in the law of June 28, 2012 (art. 4, paragraphs 51-68) where there has been an emphasis on the development of entrepreneurial skills in formal, non-formal and informal training courses. Moreover, in the context of HE, through the MIUR decree no. 4244 of 13.03.2018 entrepreneurship education has been introduced providing courses aimed at developing attitudes, capabilities, knowledge, and competencies necessary for self-employment. Those courses start in the first two years of HE and continue in the last three years of high school with active involvement of students and a special focus on the "practice" of entrepreneurship²⁷. The MIUR decree offers a syllabus that was built in cooperation with other stakeholders among them business associations, private companies, and experts in the field, and provides teachers with tools and teaching methods to be used by students. At the basis of that syllabus, there is the conceptual model of the Entrepreneurship Competence Framework (ENTRECOMP) as defined by the European Commission.

At the university level instead, with the exception of courses such as economics and management, there are no centralized initiatives that aim to enhance entrepreneurship education. Yet, there are several Italian universities that offer *ad hoc* courses to support the creation of new businesses, as well as to reinforce the skills of young entrepreneurs (for instance university business incubators)²⁸.

²⁴ The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), Guidance Supporting Europe's aspiring entrepreneurs: Policy and practice to harness future potential, 2011, p.16.

²⁵ World Economic Forum, Educating the Next Wave of Entrepreneurs. Unlocking entrepreneurial capabilities to meet the global challenges of the 21st century. A Report of the Global Education Initiative. 2009, p.42.

²⁶ European Commission, Employment & Entrepreneurship. Development of entrepreneurship competence, 2024, <https://shorturl.at/afDRS>.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

Although there are some initiatives at the governmental and local level, more needs to be done especially in a coherent, and systematic way. It would be highly important to create universal access to entrepreneurship education and guidance for all and provide all teachers with the right training and preparation needed²⁹. There should be more initiatives aiming at providing the right set of skills for success in an entrepreneurial environment, and the education system should be reinforced in order to promote sufficient awareness of entrepreneurial careers, skills, and opportunities³⁰.

Therefore, with some exceptions, in Italy, there is still no holistic and systematized approach that accompanies students from the transfer phase of theoretical notions to the embryonic stages of incubation. Above all, what is missing from the vast majority of entrepreneurship initiatives are:

- coaching and mentoring cycles that are structured, formalized, and especially long-term oriented, such as to support the theory-practice transition³¹
- opportunities to get in touch with investors (institutional or otherwise), in order to support the 'scalability' of ideas
- engagement and real support of local politics - not only at the policy level but also at the level of providing adequate spaces for workshops, gathering, and exchange points, and in general environments that naturally and informally self-emerge as local hubs for instance.

²⁹ Guerra, Valentina. "SMEunited addresses young entrepreneurs in Italy", SME UNITED Crafts & SMEs in Europe, 2022. Accessed April 27, 2024. <https://shorturl.at/hvxD6>.

³⁰ Schivardi, Fabiano. "The Education Of Italian Entrepreneurs". Università Bocconi, Policy Brief no. 04, (2017), p. 4.

³¹ Presta, C. Un Paese che osa? Il rapporto Gem sull'imprenditorialità. Formiche.net. 2024. <https://shorturl.at/P4aZn>.

Challenges

Based on findings, please provide for challenges, barriers, inhibitors, etc., which have a negative impact for the for the professional development of young aspiring solo-entrepreneurs.

These challenges can refer to both endogenous factors (i.e., low levels of digital business skills, sense of initiative, financial illiteracy, etc. among target groups) as well as structural (i.e., lack of support policies, economic instability, etc.).

Please always quote the source and list the source in the references (see also the bibliography file in Excel).

Although in Italy there is a good inclination towards self-employment and self-entrepreneurship, in terms of feasibility only a lower percentage of Italians consider it feasible to become self-employed. One of the major causes is the lack of financial resources and many structural contextual gaps such as bureaucratic and tax burdens³², followed by a lack of employment security (many fear the risk of bankruptcy, loss of property and real estate, and the risk of irregular income)³³. Although these data are more positive when considering only young people where there is a generally greater inclination and entrepreneurial initiative than adults, certainly, the country's systemic limitations, mistrust and uncertainty regarding future expectations and limited entrepreneurial training both at school and university play a key role in these obstacles³⁴.

There is a need to strengthen certain aspects of education, especially making entrepreneurship education systematically present in the curriculum³⁵, in other words by taking entrepreneurship learning out of business schools, by supporting for instance interdisciplinary approaches, and by enhancing entrepreneurship capabilities among other fields of study or also using digital and e-learning platforms to engage more young people³⁶. Another important action in empowering entrepreneurship education would be to enhance group projects, case studies and more in general allow students access to the world of work with practical assignments, developing more internship opportunities for students and young people through which students can explore their career options (especially if there are opportunities available in start-up companies and there is strong and active support in the pre and post placement evaluations). Also, mentoring plays a relevant role in transferring knowledge about the business environment and the development of entrepreneurial skills. Mentors can be a particularly relevant source of inspiration³⁷.

All those measures and initiatives should be supported by special tools and techniques that engage young people in entrepreneurial activities. In fact, despite awareness raising and information giving (for instance through printed and digital information and guidance) is still by far the most common method of engagement across Europe, that might not be the most effective one. For instance, increasing and enhancing non-formal guidance methods such as using the role of Student Ambassadors or Student-led clubs and networks might be a more powerful and successful way of informing and engaging students and young people in entrepreneurship learning³⁸.

³² Confcommercio, Le giovani generazioni in Italia dopo la pandemia, 2021, p.16.

³³ Assolombardia, Giovani: un capitale che frutta innovazione e competitività, <https://shorturl.at/bpwK2>, p.55.

³⁴ Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, Valutazione ex-ante degli strumenti finanziari da attivare nell'ambito del PON "Iniziativa Occupazione Giovani 2014-2015" e PON "Sistemi di politiche attive per l'occupazione 2014-2020". Rapporto intermedio, p.20.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p.40.

³⁶ Fraccaro, V. & Ghezzi P. Il problema dell'Italia con le imprese giovanili: trend dell'ultimo decennio e sfide per il futuro. 2022. Studio Infocamere.

³⁷ Bologna Business School. "Il gap tra intenzione imprenditoriale e azione. L'influenza del contesto sociale". Accessed April 27, 2024. <https://shorturl.at/ACFL7>.

³⁸ Schivardi, Fabiano. "The Education Of Italian Entrepreneurs". Università Bocconi, Policy Brief no. 04, (2017), p. 27.

Conclusions

Based on findings, please provide for a list of lessons learned and recommendations that are of relevance both for readers and SELF future implementation.

Self-employment is becoming a phenomenon with a growing influence on the business sector and in general in the whole society. Solopreneurship represents a highly valid pathway for HE students to transition from the world of education to the world of work.

Based on the findings of this research paper, there are a few lessons learned and recommendations that are relevant to the scope of the SELF project.

- There is the need to introduce in a more systematic and holistic way entrepreneurial education both at the secondary and university levels with interdisciplinary curricula that enable students to discover new self-employment skills and pathways, as well as to improve their chances for becoming successful entrepreneurs in the labor market.
- Communication is essential to reach more recipients and new ways for engaging young people need to be found, such as the use of Student Ambassadors or Student-led associations or clubs that can mentor other students. This might be a more powerful way of informing and engaging students in entrepreneurship learning.
- Empowering entrepreneurial education by using different methods and tools, and new innovative learning and teaching approaches (by also supporting teachers on the way) such as exploiting the e-learning training and platforms opportunities. Those tools allow more accessible and flexible teaching methods.
- Allowing students to access the world of work with more practical assignments and case studies from the real world
- Coordination to avoid overlaps in regional, national, and EU programs to build an integrated system to cover all the territorial specificities (especially in Italy where there are differences according to the region and the specific area).

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