AMERICA'S PASTA PASSION

Marilyn Myers takes an inside look at pasta production.

October is Pasta Month—possibly timed to play off Columbus Day and the Italian influence on America's eating habits.

But it isn't just the Italian influence that's prompted a dramatic growth in consumption over the last 10 years. Americans are increasingly aware of the health benefits of complex carbohydrates, and, in addition, expanded use of pasta in restaurants has spilled over to more pasta-eating at home.

According to the National Pasta Association, dry pasta is now consumed at a rate of 19 pounds per person. In 1981, consumers only ate 13 pounds per year. By 1995 that number is expected to grow to 24 pounds per person or 192 servings annually.

But it wasn't Columbus that brought macaroni to the new world. In fact, it was French flour miller Antoine Zerega who opened the first pasta factory in 1848 in Brooklyn, New York, on a site that eventually ended up at the foot of that borough's world-famous bridge.

According to Robert Vermylen, one of Zerega's great-great-grandsons and the company's sales manager, at the original factory the spaghetti strands needed to be exposed to varying levels of humidity so the long strings wouldn't crust on the outside before having a chance to dry in the center. Pasta runners with deep-grooved calluses between widely spaced fingers carried long rods of spaghetti to-and-fro, laboring throughout the day to alternate the strands between the extremes of the factory's damp basement (for moist sweating sessions) and the hot roof, where the long strings would dry in the sunshine.

Today, pasta manufacturers universally use vast, climate-controlled drying enclosures at the end of two-story dough-making and extruding machines, making prep to packaging virtually an all-in-one operation. These mostly Italian- and Swiss-made machines mix, force and slice pasta dough into the hundreds of available pasta shapes. Some manufacturers produce as many as 300 shape and thickness combinations.

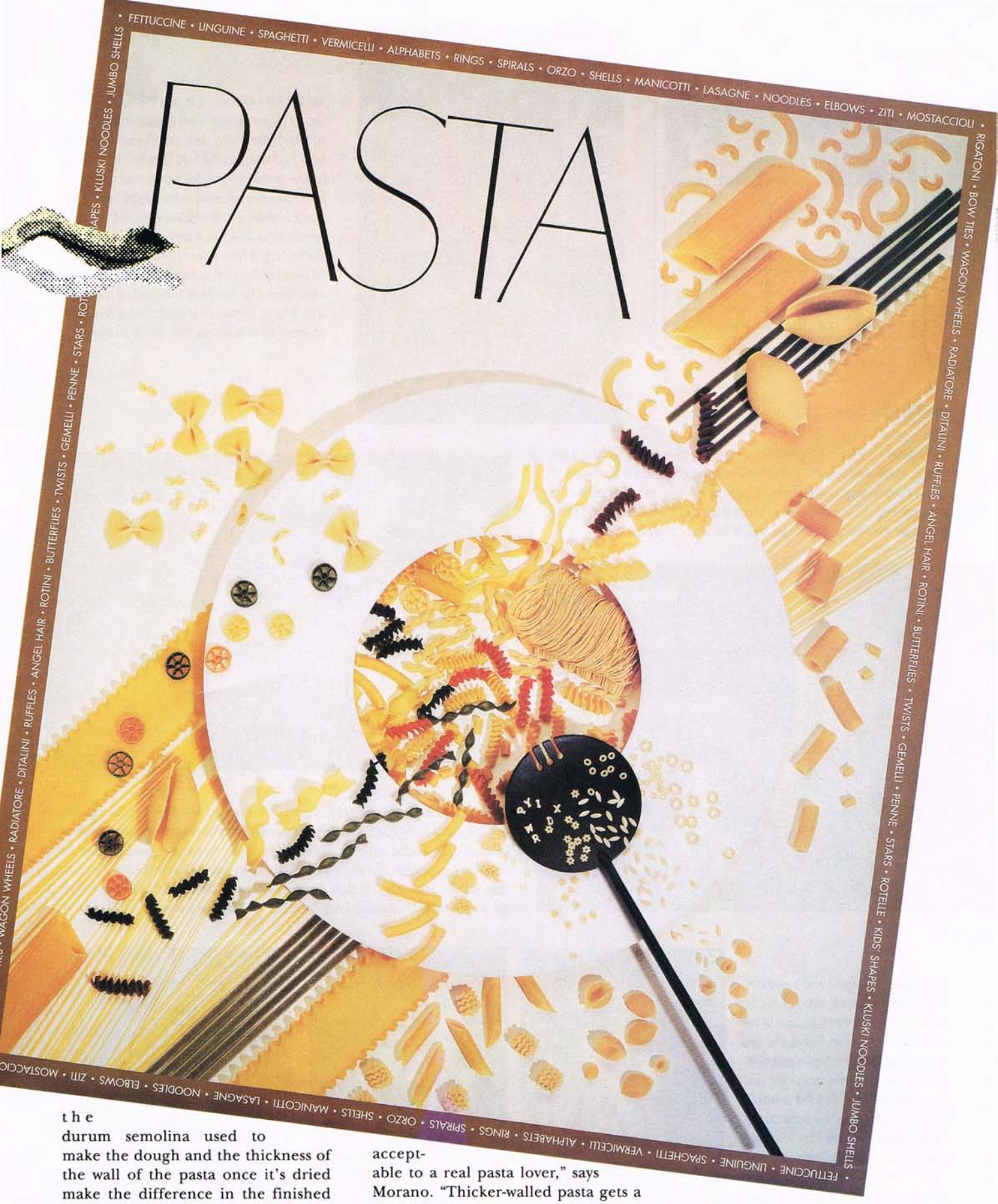
At the Creamette plant in Minneapolis, which makes pasta for supermarkets and the foodservice industry, some 30,000 pounds of pasta are produced an hour. According to board chairman John Westerberg, the quantity produced at this one plant alone has increased 33 percent over the last several years with the addition of two new production lines. In 1989, pasta capacity at the plant was 23,000 pounds an hour.

Julia Kinnaird of the Arlington, Virginia-based National Pasta Association says, "Restaurants lead the way in transforming macaroni into pasta. In the 1980s we made that switch and it has made a big difference." There does seem, however, to be some resistance on the part of American chefs to serve American-made pasta. Luke Morano, whose grandfather founded the Philadelphia Macaroni Company, calls this phenomenon "the mystique of the motherland," which is an apt phrase since so much of the ingredients and equipment used in both countries is the same.

Americans use the same Italian machinery to make, shape and dry their dough as the Italians do, and the Italians use the same American durum wheat to add color to their pasta. (In 1990 alone, Italy imported over 165 million pounds of American durum for grinding into semolina.)

While the Italians add in only a certain percentage of American durum to their semolina recipe, primarily for color, the farmers who grow over 80 percent of the U.S. durum crop in the North Dakota plains—as well as millers and pasta manufacturers—maintain that 100 percent American durum wheat grinds into the best semolina and therefore makes the best pasta. American durum is bred primarily for a beautiful amber color, high protein and gluten strength and disease resistance, according to John Lukach, a plant breeder at the North Dakota State University Agricultural Experiment Station at Devil's Lake. Brendon Donnelly at the Northern Crops Institute's demonstration pasta plant and durum mill in Fargo, North Dakota, explains the reasoning behind the development of these characteristics: A rich, yellow-colored semolina makes attractive, appetizing pasta; high protein, strong-gluten durum wheat translates into pasta with better stability, cooking quality and chew; disease resistance reduces the need for plant chemical dependency.

But almost everyone involved in the production of pasta agrees that when it comes to the bottom line, the "chew" is what counts the most. The quality of



the durum semolina used to make the dough and the thickness of the wall of the pasta once it's dried make the difference in the finished product. American pasta manufacturers are building their pasta walls a little thicker to take the "chew" factor into account. "Thin-walled pasta isn't acceptable to a real pasta lover," says Morano. "Thicker-walled pasta gets a better bite."

For stir-fried curried pasta with spinach and shrimp, see RECIPE FILE.

This poster is available from the National Pasta Association for $10. Send check or money order to: NPA Pasta Poster, National Pasta Association, 2101 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201.