



TUTTOFOOD Milan 2026: Innovation, International Expansion and Operational Excellence Drive Italian Food

In May 2026, Lincoln International's Consumer Group attended TUTTOFOOD Milan, one of Europe's leading food and beverage trade fairs and a key gathering point for global food producers, retailers, distributors, investors and industry executives. The event provided a valuable opportunity to engage directly with entrepreneurs, CEOs and senior management teams across the Italian food sector and discuss the strategic trends shaping the industry's future.

Consumers continue to prioritize health, transparency, convenience and authenticity, while food companies face increasing pressure to navigate inflation, sustainability requirements and geopolitical complexity. Discussions at TUTTOFOOD reflected a sector that is increasingly international, operationally sophisticated and strategically disciplined, while still maintaining the entrepreneurial culture and long-term vision that continue to distinguish many family-owned Italian businesses.

Against this backdrop, Italian food companies remain exceptionally well-positioned. Several relevant global themes that consistently emerged in discussions are analyzed in the article below.

1. Convenience Evolves Through Health and Quality

- Convenience remains a major growth driver globally, but consumers increasingly expect ready-to-eat and ready-to-cook products to deliver healthier ingredients, premium quality and restaurant-style experiences.
- Companies are increasingly combining convenience with simplified formulations, premium ingredients and stronger nutritional positioning while expanding into adjacent areas, including functional nutrition, protein enrichment, organic products and wellness-oriented offerings.
- Cross-category innovation continues to accelerate across frozen food, ready meals, savory products and specialty bakery segments, where scalability, exportability and premium positioning remain particularly attractive.

Lincoln Takeaway:

The future of convenience is increasingly defined by companies capable of combining wellness, premium quality, category innovation and scalable industrial capabilities while maintaining authentic culinary positioning.

2. Private Label Continues to Gain Share as a Sophisticated Business

- The balance between private label and branded products remains one of the most important strategic discussions across the global food industry, particularly as inflation and consumer price sensitivity continue to support private label penetration across Europe.
- Retailers are increasingly investing in higher-quality own-label offerings positioned around premiumization, wellness, sustainability and category specialization rather than purely entry-price positioning.
- This evolution is expected to remain a key driver of consolidation and mergers and acquisitions (M&A) activity, particularly as scale, manufacturing efficiency and customer diversification become increasingly critical.

Lincoln Takeaway:

Private label has evolved into a highly sophisticated industrial model where operational excellence, innovation capability and retailer integration increasingly matter more than the traditional distinction between branded and own-label products.

3. International Expansion and Supply Chain Resilience Drive Growth

- Preserving authentic Italian quality standards and production identity remains central for companies expanding internationally, with Made in Italy continuing to represent a major competitive advantage in global markets alongside strong demand for premium, traceable and authentic products.
- Many companies are increasingly leveraging manufacturing flexibility, operational expertise and scalable industrial infrastructure to support international expansion across multiple categories and geographies.
- Companies continue to navigate raw material volatility, logistics complexity, labor shortages and geopolitical uncertainty while evaluating new approaches to supply chain resilience, technological innovation and selective international expansion.

Lincoln Takeaway:

Companies capable of combining international reach, operational excellence and manufacturing flexibility with the enduring strength of the Made in Italy brand are strategically positioned to drive sustainable long-term growth.

4. Clean Label, Ingredient Transparency and Wellness Redefine Innovation

- Consumers are increasingly scrutinizing ingredient lists. Demand trends are pushing food companies toward shorter formulations, recognizable ingredients and greater supply chain transparency, making clean-label positioning an increasingly standard expectation across many categories.
- Italian producers remain advantageously situated due to the global perception of Italian food as authentic, minimally processed and rooted in culinary tradition, further reinforcing the value of the Made in Italy positioning.
- At the same time, rising demand for gluten-free and allergen-free products is creating significant operational complexity, leading many operators to focus more broadly on wellness-oriented positioning—including organic, grains and healthier formulations—rather than aggressively pursuing dedicated free-from categories.

Lincoln Takeaway:

As consumer expectations around health, transparency and ingredient quality continue to rise, companies with strong manufacturing expertise, disciplined innovation capabilities and authentic product positioning are likely to strengthen consumer trust and reinforce long-term competitive differentiation.

5. Geopolitical Complexity Reshapes Strategic Decision-Making

- Tariff uncertainty, logistics volatility, raw material inflation and geopolitical tensions remain major concerns for internationally exposed operators.
- Geographic diversification is becoming increasingly important as companies seek to mitigate risks and reduce dependence on regions currently facing economic or political instability.
- Despite these challenges, Italian food exports continue to benefit from strong structural global demand supported by the enduring strength of Made in Italy and the premium positioning of many categories.

Lincoln Takeaway:

In an increasingly fragmented global environment, resilience, geographic diversification and international flexibility are becoming critical competitive advantages alongside product quality and brand strength.

Looking Ahead with Lincoln

As global food markets continue to evolve, companies capable of combining international scalability, operational resilience, category innovation and the enduring strength of Made in Italy are likely to be best-positioned for long-term success.

With deep sector expertise and extensive experience advising entrepreneurs, family-owned businesses, private equity investors and global strategic buyers across the food and beverage value chain, Lincoln International is positioned to help clients navigate an increasingly complex and competitive market environment.

Reach out to discuss how the themes highlighted at TUTTOFOOD 2026 could shape strategic opportunities and industry dynamics in the years ahead.

Ready to discuss the opportunities ahead for you?

Connect with a senior professional at connect@lincolninternational.com