Bella Italia!

It's official: Australians are mad about Italian Food — and this trend shows no sign of reversing.

Italian has closed the gap with Chinese as our favourite cuisine, with Italian clearly Numero Uno in Victoria and South Australia.

And when it comes to our most beloved comfort foods, pasta rates equal to chocolate in our top five.

Every year Coles sells more than 3.4m packets of its branded spaghetti – that's enough pasta to circle the globe 10 times! And if spaghetti isn't your preferred pasta you're not alone, every year we also sell 3.4m packs of penne and 3.7m packs of spirals.

And what is pasta without a tomato-based sauce? Packed with antioxidants and rich in flavour, Coles annually sells 1.4m tins of Coles Tomato Paste. With roughly nine roma tomatoes in every 140g tin, this equates to enough tomatoes to cover two-thirds of Italy!

This passion for pasta comes as no surprise to Australia's favourite chef and Coles' ambassador, Curtis Stone. "Quick to prepare, tasty and endlessly versatile, pasta is one of those perfect pantry ingredients – if you have a pack on hand you know you can easily cook a quick dinner the whole family will love."

Pasta's subtle flavour makes it a particular hit with fussy little eaters – which goes some of the way to explaining Australian families love affair with Spaghetti Bolognese. Research suggests roughly two out of every five Aussie households serve Spaghetti Bolognese every week, that's 431m bowls of 'Spag Bol' a year (that's seven times the population of Italy!).

So what's so special about Spaghetti Bolognese? "It's a parent's blessing," Coles' consulting nutritionist, Victoria Inglis explains. "It's low-cost, quick and simple. Spaghetti Bolognese is a meal that can almost guarantee the kids will clean their plates without a single word of complaint! It can be a healthy dish, too. If you use lean beef mince you're providing a good source of protein and iron. Whole meal pasta is delicious, filling and packed with fibre; and adding extra vegetables in the sauce is a great way to get vegies into children who don't normally eat them."

And it's not just kids who, after a rough day, reach for a bowl of Bolognese. "Many grown-ups refer to it as 'comfort food'," explains Victoria, "as it tends to remind us of comforting childhood memories or bring back feelings of familiarity and security."

Sitting down with a bowl of Bolognese has been among Australians' top three dinner choices for the past 20 years, but the ingredient that most dramatically reflects Australia's latest 'turn to Italian' is ... parmesan. Figures from Dairy Australia reveal Aussies consumed 6,948 tonnes of parmesan in 2010, which is nearly 50 per cent more than in 2009 and about double the amount of parmesan we grated, peeled or crumbled in 2004.

All these warm, comforting, family-friendly findings have inspired Coles to make May a month where we celebrate all things Italian. Curtis Stone has a delicious new range of Italian-inspired Feed Your Family recipes, including a golden Baked Rigatoni; a season's-best Minestrone; a meltingly tender Osso Bucco and a Lemon Panna Cotta with Pine Nut Brittle. Customers can also look out for exclusive Italian-inspired products and great deals on the Italian foods they've told us they love so much.

For further information or interviews please call Jon Church at Coles on 0419 748 653 or Donna Ogier at Coles on 0409 576 566.