

Food and Wine

The joys of Italian products

Today, Italian cuisine is cherished around the world. It's no secret that it is incomparable, even though many try to imitate it. Ranging from simple to hearty, sweet to spicy, subtle to strong, each dish is prepared with the freshest and healthiest ingredients...plus a pinch of love.

In Italy, food may be a necessity, but it has a higher meaning – it has been a pleasure, a philosophy, and a science since ancient times. Decisions are made around a table set with food, wine, and the people you really care about. The dishes are colorful and flavorful, a real explosion of simplicity and natural ingredients.

What is particular about Italian cuisine is that it is regional. Almost every town has something unique, and from one end of a region to the other the specialties can change completely. The reason for this culinary fragmentation is simple. Before WWII, with the exception of the nobility and the clergy, most Italians simply didn't travel, and as a result, still today, every town and every valley has something different. Neighboring towns and valleys will also share techniques and recipes, and add individual twists.

Regional Products & Specialties

VALLE D'AOSTA – Fontina cheese, Renette apples, Martin Spec pears, Tegole almond cookies. Vitello alla valdostana, breaded veal cutlet, fried and topped with fontina and ham, then reheated in the oven over a slice of polenta.

PIEDMONT – White truffles, Robiola cheese, rice from Vercelli, Gianduiotti chocolates. Bicerin is Turin's signature drink, a blend of coffee, milk, and chocolate.

LOMBARDY – Bresaola cured beef, Torrone, sweet nougat, ossobuco. Risotto alla Milanese is sauteed rice cooked in broth and saffron.

TRENTINO – Speck, smoked ham, Bioldi blood sausages, goat cheeses. Orzetto is a barley soup made with onion, garlic, vegetables, and herbs simmered with speck.

FRIULI VENEZIA-GIULIA – San Daniele prosciutto, Montasio cheese. Iota is a traditional soup from Trieste made with beans, potatoes and sauerkraut.

VENETO – Pandoro Christmas cake and tiramisù are the region's favorite sweets.

LIGURIA – Focaccia bread, pesto sauce, and



olives. Farinata is a thin pancake made with chickpea flour.

EMILIA ROMAGNA – Balsamic vinegar, Parmigiano Reggiano, mortadella & Prosciutto di Parma. Tortellini alla Bolognese in brodo are pasta filled with mortadella, prosciutto and veal served in a meat broth.

TUSCANY – Bistecca alla Fiorentina is delicious T-bone steak. Other specialties are panzanella, salad made with vegetables and stale bread, and ribollita, vegetable minestrone with black cabbage.

UMBRIA – Black truffles, honey and Budellaccio salame are some of the region's favorites.

MARCHE – Some notable products are Porchetta, roasted pork, and Salame di Fabriano. Fossa is amazing cheese aged while buried in a pit.

ABRUZZO – Saffron, Confetti di Sulmona, sugar coated almonds, and black lentils. A traditional dish is Maccheroni alla Chitarra, handmade pasta cut in thin strips similar to the strings of a guitar.

LAZIO – Puntarelle salad, artichokes, and lamb (a lamb specialty is called Abbacchio alla Romana). Bucatini all'Amatriciana are long pasta served in a tomato and pork sauce, seasoned with grated pecorino cheese.

CAMPANIA – Mozzarella, lemons, fresh seafood. Pizza was born here as well as sfogliatelle, shell pastry filled with ricotta cheese.

MOLISE – White celery, pasta filled with ricotta,

and Picellati, honey pastries with nuts and grapes.

BASILICATA – Diavolicchio chili peppers, Luganiga sausage, Ciaudedda, braised artichokes stuffed with potatoes and stewed in tomatoes.

PUGLIA – Orecchiette pasta, Taralli bread ribbons, and Cocomeri cucumbers.

CALABRIA – Liquorice, chili peppers, cacioavallo cheese and capocollo, cured pork meat.

SICILY – Sea salt from Trapani, eggplant, almond paste known as marzapane, delicate olive oil, and succulent blood oranges.

SARDINIA – Pecorino cheese, Fiore sardo cheese, and wild boar. Porcheddu is roasted suckling pig flavored with herbs (myrtle berries) and spices.

Favorite Ingredients

Although every region has its own treasures and signature dishes, there are some staple ingredients that are used throughout the country. These ingredients are unique to Italy in use, quality and quantity. They are imported all over the world and are used in international cuisines as well.

On Olive Oil

Italy is covered with olive trees, from the northern regions all the way down to Puglia and Sicily. The pressing of tree-ripened olives extracts a tasty, monounsaturated oil that is good for cooking and

for salads. The flavor, color and fragrance of olive oils can vary greatly depending on distinctions such as growing region (oils from southern Italy tend to be more fruity) and the crop's condition. Olive oils are graded according to the degree of acidity they contain.

The best oils are cold-pressed, a chemical-free process that involves only pressure, which produces a natural level of low acidity.

EXTRA VIRGIN OIL is only 1% acid and is the result of the first pressing of the olives. It can range from a crystalline champagne color to greenish-golden to light green. It is the finest and most expensive. There are three categories of extra virgin olive oil:

Mild – Light and buttery. Ideal for raw meats, pasta sauces, raw vegetables and fish.

Fruity – Slightly stronger, it pairs well with grilled meats, pasta sauces, cooked vegetables



and bruschetta.

Spicy – Strong taste, perfect for rustic dishes.

VIRGIN OLIVE OIL is also a first-press oil, with a slightly higher level of acidity (between 1 and 3%).

FINO OLIVE OIL is a blend of extra virgin olive oil and virgin oils.

OLIVE OIL is a combination of refined olive oil and virgin or extra virgin olive oil.

Always check the label to make certain the oil is estate pressed and bottled, and only buy olive oil in non-opaque glass, which will allow you to see the oil. It should be green, though not too brilliant a green. Be wary, on the other hand, of oil in cans that you cannot see through, and also of very pale oils, or yellow oils. Pale oils have certainly been filtered and may have been cut with other less healthy oils, whereas deep yellow oils could well be old. Always check the expiration date; it should be two years after bottling. Olive oil is an excellent source of omega-3 fatty acid, the acid one also finds in caught (as opposed to raised) oily fish such as salmon, which is important in preventing cardiovascular disease. In addition, olive oil reduces LDL cholesterol — which sticks to the arteries — and raises HDL cholesterol, which is instead beneficial and it is a powerful antioxidant and appears to inhibit colorectal cancer.

On Polenta



Polenta, the Italian version of cornmeal, is tasty, extremely versatile, and an ideal accompaniment to many dishes. Formerly a peasant food, polenta has recently become quite upscale, with polenta dishes served in fine restaurants, and prepared polenta is found in supermarkets at rather high prices.

Polenta is often cooked in a large copper pot known in Italian as paiolo. In northern Italy there are many different ways to cook polenta. The most famous Lombard polenta dishes are polenta uncia, polenta concia, and polenta e gorgonzola; all are cooked with various cheeses and butter. It can also be cooked with porcini mushrooms, rapini, or other vegetables or meats, as in the Venetian poenta e osei, with little birds.

Polenta is popular in also in Savoyard, Swiss, Austrian, Croatian, Slovenian, Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Corsican, Argentine, Uruguayan, Brazilian, and Mexican cuisine.

Ingredients:

- 1 pound of coarsely ground cornmeal
- 2 quarts boiling water
- 1ts. of salt

Set the water on the fire in a wide bottomed pot and add the salt. When it comes to a boil, add the cornmeal in a very slow stream (you don't want the pot to stop boiling), stirring constantly with a wooden spoon to keep lumps from forming. Continue stirring, in the same direction, as the mixture thickens, for about a half-hour (the longer you stir the better the polenta will be); adding boil-

ing water as necessary. SERVES 4.

If you like polenta, you should consider purchasing a polenta maker, which is a pot with a motor-driven paddle that takes care of the stirring for you.

On Pasta

The role of pasta has changed greatly throughout Italy's culinary history. Once only eaten by Italy's elite as a handmade specialty, today pasta is enjoyed by all and is the foundation of Italian cuisine both in Italy and around the world.

In the days before industrialization, dry pasta made from durum wheat, water, and a pinch of salt (spaghetti, rigatoni, and so on), was easier to make, and therefore more popular, in the South, where warmer temperatures and increased sunlight hastened the drying of the pasta.

Central and parts of Northern Italy, especially Emilia Romagna and Piedmont, are instead known for fresh pasta made with eggs, flour, and salt, for example tagliatelle, and pappardelle, both of which are flat forms. The center and north are also known for stuffed pasta, for example ravioli or tortellini, and one can find these kinds of pasta in areas where they didn't eat much flat or dry pasta until recently, for example Lombardia.

Risotto is eaten more in the northern regions. Indeed most of the world's best short-grained strains of rice, including Arborio, Carnaroli, and Vialone Nano, are Northern Italian.

Types of pasta sauces

Aglio, olio e peperoncino Tossed in garlic, olive oil, and hot peppers

Burro e salvia With butter and sage

Al sugo With tomato sauce

Amatriciana Bacon or sausage, with tomatoes, onion, and hot pepper

Arrabbiata Spicy tomato sauce

Astice Lobster sauce

Bolognese Meat sauce, usually with tomato

Bucaniera Seafood, tomato, garlic, parsley, and oil

Cacciatora Tomato, onion, peppers, mushrooms, garlic, herbs, and wine sauce

Cacio e Pepe Sheep's cheese and ground pepper

Carbonara Cream, ham or bacon, egg, and parmesan cheese

Frutti di Mare Seafood

Matriciana Pork and tomato sauce

Norma Tomato, eggplant, and salted ricotta cheese

Puttanesca Tomatoes, capers, red peppers, anchovies, garlic, and oil

Quattro Formaggi With four cheeses

Ragù Tomato-based meat sauce

In Italy, the pasta shape is an integral part of a meal – its building blocks – serving as the foundation for sauces bursting with each region's herbs, spices, meats, cheeses, and vegetables. Thicker, flat, long shapes, like fettuccine, pair with extremely robust sauces. While specialty shapes, like shells are great with hearty dairy-based sauces (cheese or béchamel) and vegetable sauces (like beans, lentils, chick peas, pumpkin, or other chunky vegetables).

Cooking pasta is easy, but how much water to use, which pot, and the right combination of pasta and sauce must be chosen carefully in order to prepare a perfect pasta meal.

Use a tall, large pot filled no more than 3/4 with water.

Salt the water. This brings out the natural flavor of the pasta. (Salt must be added once the water has started to boil. Adding salt too early may lengthen the boiling time).

Do not add oil to the water. Olive oil does nothing for the taste of pasta and its usage will make the pasta slippery, allowing the sauce to slide off the pasta.

Follow the cooking times on the package.

At boiling time, pour in the pasta and increase the heat source to bring the water back to a boil. When the pasta is cooked al dente, there should be a slight resistance in the center when the pasta is chewed.

Drain pasta immediately after it is done cooking. Always save a couple of tablespoons of the cooking water; it may be needed to dilute the sauce.

Add sauce and serve immediately.

To finish the pasta, top with parmesan cheese, a little freshly ground black pepper or olive oil.

On Garlic

Italian food has a reputation of being garlicky, and indeed that's not completely undeserved. Piedmont's famous dipping sauce Bagna Caoda is made with olive oil, butter, anchovies and lots of garlic, while the Neapolitan Pizza alla Marinara is made with just tomato and sliced garlic (no

cheese). However, there are large parts of the peninsula where garlic doesn't play much of a role, appearing only in moderation and well cooked. When sautéing garlic, take care lest it overcook, because at that point its flavor becomes quite unpleasant.

On Wine

The diversity of dishes that Italy has to offer is also a characteristic of its wines.

Italy is home to 2,000 home-grown grape varieties and exports more wine than any other country.

North Italy boasts some of the world's finest wines, from Piedmont's Nebbiolo and Barbera to Friuli's whites. Central Italy's wines are excellent, too, from Tuscany's Bolgheri and Chianti to the Marche's Verdicchio. Southern wines are unique, from Campania's Taurasi and Basilicata's Aglianico del Vulture to Pantelleria's Passito.

Reading an Italian label is usually straight forward: there's the winery name, perhaps the vineyard that the grapes came from, the year, and an abbreviation (DOC, DOCG) or a phrase (Vino Da Tavola). These denominations guide consumers in their choice and ensure quality control.

There are four major categories of Italian wines:

VINO A DENOMINAZIONE DI ORIGINE CONTROLLATA E GARANTITA (DOCG). These wines are from the wine regions recognized as the finest in the country. DOCG wines must pass an evaluation of a tasting committee before they can be bottled. The nine DOCG regions are: Barbaresco, Barolo, Brunello di Montalcino, Chianti, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, Albana di Romagna, Gattinara, Carmignano, and Torgiano Rosso Riserva.

VINO A DENOMINAZIONE DI ORIGINE CONTROLLATA (DOC) is the Italian answer to the French AOC. DOC wines are produced in specific well-defined regions, according to specific rules designed to preserve the traditional wine-making practices of the individual regions. Thus, the rules for making Barolo differ markedly from those for making Chianti Classico. The DOC category was introduced in the early 60s with the purpose to improve the quality of wines.

VINO A INDICAZIONE GEOGRAFICA (IGT) is a wine produced in a specific area. There's nothing special about most of it.

VINO DA TAVOLA. This is the lowest class of wine, a





wine made by the producer as he sees fit to make it. There are few rules, and the result is often insipid, thin, weak, and acidic.

Wines from North to South

VALLE D'AOSTA – Müller Thurgau (DOC) and Torrette Superiore (DOC)

PIEDMONT – Barolo (DOCG), Barbaresco (DOCG), Barbera (DOC), Nebbiolo (DOC), Dolcetto (DOC) and Asti Spumante (DOCG)

LOMBARDY Franciacorta Spumante (DOCG), Bonarda (DOCG), Lambrusco (DOC), Valtellina Superiore (DOCG)

TRENTINO – Marzemino (DOC), Riesling (DOC), Pinot Bianco (DOC), Moscato

FRIULI VENEZIA-GIULIA – Tocai Friulano (DOC), Collio Goriziano Cabernet (DOC), Ramandolo (DOCG)

VENETO – Recioto di Soave (DOCG), Bardolino (DOCG), Prosecco di Valdobbiadene (DOC), Tocai (DOC), Amarone della Valpolicella (DOC)

LIGURIA – Vermentino (DOC), Pigato (DOC), Schiacchetrà (DOC), Rossese di Dolceacqua (DOC)

EMILIA ROMAGNA – Albana di Romagna, (DOCG), Sangiovese di Romagna (DOC), Trebbiano di Romagna (DOC)

TUSCANY – Chianti (DOC & DOCG), Brunello di Montalcino (DOC), Vernaccia di San Gimignano (DOC)

UMBRIA – Sagrantino (DOCG), Torgiano Rosso Riserva (DOCG), Colli Perugini (DOC)

MARCHE – Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi (DOC), Rosso Piceno (DOC)

ABRUZZO – Montepulciano d'Abruzzo (DOC), Cerasuolo (DOC), Trebbiano (DOC)

LAZIO – Frascati (DOC), Montefiasconi Est! Est! Est! (DOC) Torre Ercolana (DOC)

CAMPANIA – Lacryma Christi (DOC), Fiano d'Avellino (DOCG), Greco di Tufo (DOCG)

MOLISE – Biferno (DOC), Pentro di Isernia (DOC)

BASILICATA – Aglianico del Vulture
PUGLIA – Primitivo di Manduria (DOC), Aleatico (DOC)

CALABRIA – Cirò (DOC), Greco (DOC)

SICILY – Nero d'Avola (DOC), Moscato (DOC), Marsala

SARDINIA – Cannonau (DOC), Nuragus (DOC), Vermentino (DOC)

On beer

Although wine reigns supreme, production of Italian beer is widespread.

The most well known brands are:

BIRRA MORETTI Founded in Udine in 1859 by Luigi Moretti. It is particularly known for its Moretti Doppio Malto, an amber lager.

BIRRA PERONI, or simply Peroni. Founded in Vigevano in 1846. Its most famous product is Nastro Azzurro, a pilsner-style beer, which is marketed worldwide.