

THE ITALIAN TABLE

by Lana Bortolot



The rustic charm of this rough-hewn osteria makes dining a complete experience.

Practicing l'arte di mangiare bene — the art of eating well

Among the many splendid ways to experience Italy, perhaps the most satisfying is through its cuisine, which is as varied and rich as the country's other cultural offerings. Italians love to eat, but moreover, they love to feed people. So make the local trattoria your first stop in any Italian town, and you'll experience authentic gastronomic pleasures that will inspire you long after you've returned home.

VENICE: FOR LOVERS OF SEAFOOD. Venice's watery environs hint at its seafood specialties, which flavor much of northeastern Italy. The local pasta, *bigoli* — a long, thin tube with a hole in the middle — is often accompanied by shellfish, salted sardines or *nero di seppia* (squid-ink sauce). Other pastas here may be served with *vongole* (fresh clams), usually prepared in a chili-pepper sauce; anchovies; *baccalà* (salt cod); or they may simply enhance the star attraction: a platter of fresh *frutti di mare* (literally translated, "fruit of the sea"), seasoned only with olive oil and lemon.

More typical of the region is polenta, a cornmeal patty often grilled and served with a sauce on the side or with liver and onions in the regional specialty, *fegato alla Veneziana*. Here, also, risotto reigns. Traditional dishes include *risi e bisi*, a soup-like porridge with fresh peas and bacon bits; and risotto *alla seppia*, a rice dish colored with the sepia ink of cuttlefish.

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Salute!

SAVORING THE JOURNEY



Perfect pasta



Beef, a Tuscan specialty

EMILIA-ROMAGNA: EARTHY DELIGHTS. Southwest of Venice lies one of Italy's richest agricultural belts, Emilia-Romagna. Many towns in this region are celebrated for their specialties — Modena for its balsamic vinegar, Parma for its cheese and ham — but it's the capital city of Bologna that speaks to all gourmands. Local fare is heavier than in the north, as Bolognese cuisine relies more on milk and cream. Here, the most celebrated food is tortellini, traditionally hand-rolled, cooked with pork meats and served in a rich broth. Vegetarians can enjoy tortelloni, a ravioli-like stuffed pasta, typically filled with pumpkin, ricotta or spinach and served in a simple butter-and-sage sauce.

For an unusual taste, look for *zampone*, a local specialty traditionally enjoyed at Christmas but available year-round. It's made from a blend of pork from striated muscle fibers, pork fat, pigskin and seasonings, and is stuffed underneath the skin of a pig's front hoof before being cooked in water.

TUSCANY: RUSTIC GOODNESS. Rich in Renaissance art and architecture, Tuscany holds the art of eating well in no less regard than it does goldsmithing, paper-making or any of the other ancient trades for which the province is known.

Despite its gilded history and the sophistication of its capital, Florence, Tuscany has a simple, natural and ancient country cuisine. Often, you'll find a coupling of aristocratic and peasant tastes — for example, *bistecca alla fiorentina*, a kingly slab (up to 2.2 pounds) of Chianina beef, grilled over coals and simply seasoned with cracked pepper.

If there are two ingredients the locals can't live without, they are olive oil (the region boasts some



The best seats in Venice

40 varieties) and beans. Indeed, Tuscans are called *mangiafagioli* or “bean-eaters.” You’ll find beans tossed in pasta with olive oil, garlic and broccoli rabe, either whole or pureed on warm bruschetta, or by themselves simply drizzled in garlic and olive oil. To get taste and tradition in one bite, ask for *ribollita* (Italian for “reboiled”), the regional bean, bread and vegetable soup.

ROME: SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY. Romans are proud of their culinary heritage, naming a great many dishes after their city: *carciofi alla Romana* (artichokes in olive oil, wine and mint), *fettucini alla Romana* (chicken and parmesan), *saltimbocca alla Romana* (veal cutlets with prosciutto), and *abbacchio alla Romana* (spring lamb in rosemary, anchovies and garlic).

Unlike northern cuisine, no meal in Rome is complete without pasta. Unique local dishes include *cacio e pepe* (pecorino cheese and black pepper) and *paglia e fieno*, green spinach and white pasta with peas, mushrooms and ham. Romans have long adhered to a food calendar, eating tripe on Saturdays, for example, and fish on Fridays. Partake in the Thursday tradition and order gnocchi, a soft potato dumpling that’s served with a variety of sauces.

The last word in Roman food is pizza. Here it’s thin-crust, baked in a coal oven and topped with only the freshest ingredients from the area’s bountiful harvest: artichokes, arugula, sun-dried tomatoes, fresh garlic and olives.

Memorable, nourishing — at times, adventurous — Italian food is, moreover, about pride and appreciation of life’s simple pleasures: the table, family and friends, and a good bottle of wine.

EASYGOING IN VENICE. There’s nowhere better to experience the easygoing charms of Venice than in one of the small *bacari* — a type of Italian pub frequented by the locals — for an afternoon of *cicchetti* (appetizers), taken with a small glass of wine called an *ombra* (literally, “shadow”).

The bacari feature simple wooden tables and benches and true immersion into local food culture. This is your chance to sample the bounties of both lagoon and land: fried crab claws, half-boiled eggs with anchovies, fried vegetables, *moscardini* (tiny octopus) with polenta, regional salami, toasted bread with creamed cod, and the particular Venetian treat, *sardee in saór* — sardines cooked and marinated with onions and vinegar, and flavored with raisins and pine nuts.

Find a tranquil spot here in the late afternoon, preferably along one of the many canals, and watch the gondolas — and time — slip by. —L. B.