



EATING OUT IN ITALY

Italians spend a higher percentage of their income on food than practically anyone in the developed world. This isn't due to poverty or food shortages. It may be due to a lack of other interests, or to a greater concern with what they eat, or both. Regardless, one eats very well in Italy. It's the national pastime, the center of family and social life. In any restaurant you'll find the topic of conversation of at least half the people to be other good meals they've enjoyed and where. Contrary to what you may think after eating in many Italian restaurants in the US, the emphasis in Italian cooking is on good fresh food, simply prepared.

Breakfast (prima colazione) usually consists of cappuccino and a cornetto (a horn shaped pastry). There are a few places in Rome where you can get eggs, pancakes, etc., such as the Piccadilli in via Barbarini or Babington's Tea Room in Piazza di Spagna (very expensive) but it's strictly a foreign custom. Most bars do serve little sandwiches called tramazzini to ward off mid-morning hunger.

Dinner (pranzo) is at 1 or 2 o'clock. Call it lunch if you want but it's traditionally the biggest meal of the day, consisting at least of a first course of pasta or soup, often preceded by antipasto, and a second of meat (or eggs, fish or cheese). Everything is typically a la carte in Italy and vegetables and salads are ordered separately, although potatoes sometimes accompany a roast without being ordered. The global economy has invaded and corrupted Italy, just like everywhere else, so that now it is not uncommon for people to eat "lunch", which often means eating a sandwich standing up at a bar, or getting a slice of pizza or, worse yet, going to McDonalds.

Supper (cena) is after 7:30 throughout Italy, but in Rome it is seldom before 8:30, with 9:30 being the peak hour in restaurants. At 6:00PM most restaurants aren't open yet and a little later the staff is usually eating. The menu and prices in the evening are normally the same as in the afternoon. Pizzerias, where you go and sit down to order and eat a pizza, usually only make pizza at night.

Antipasto- Appetizers are often on display and in great variety. This may have changed a little recently since the EC has introduced health regulations limiting the open display of food. In any case, they are meant to stimulate the appetite, not destroy it. Attention! It's not necessarily an unlimited fixed price buffet. If it's a serve yourself situation, the waiters may watch what you take and charge you accordingly, so don't hack up that beautiful smoked salmon, just ask the waiter to bring you some. Try prosciutto and melone or prosciutto and fichi (figs) in season (June and September).

Pasta- There are as many names for pasta as there are restaurants but many are redundant. Fettucine, tagliatelle and pappardelle are all more or less the same flat egg noodles in various widths. Other pasta is made with durum wheat only. Bucatini are fat spaghetti with a hole in the middle; bavette and linguine are flattened spaghetti. There are too many types of short pasta to mention but penne are perhaps the most common. There are many types of sauces but some of the most common are:

-al ragu or alla bolognese- meat and tomato sauce

-al pomodoro- simple tomato sauce, almost never the heavy, gooey, acidic, spicy stuff one finds too often in the U.S.

-al basilico- made quickly with fresh tomatoes and basil in season.

-alla crema- a simple white cream sauce. When other ingredients such as ham, peas or mushrooms are added, usually the name becomes something invented by the restaurant.

-alla carbonara- made with eggs, parmegiano, pancetta (bacon) and black pepper.

Alla amatriciana- A Roman specialty made with tomatoes and pancetta, usually a little spicy.

-con aglio e olio- just garlic and oil, and parmegiano, very tasty and a nice change for those tired of tomato sauces.

-al tonno- sauce of tuna fish and tomato.

-alle vongole- with clams in the sauce, usually red.

-alle vongole verace- with clams, shells and all, plus oil and garlic., usually no tomato.

Note: various types of risotto, especially with seafood, make a pleasant change from pasta.

Meats- Italy is not beef country, which doesn't mean that good steaks can't be found in some restaurants. Filetto is generally excellent but you may find a "bistecca" disappointing. The word appears to derive from "beef steak" but gets applied to all sorts of things, so you frequently see "bistecca di maiale" (beef steak of pork) or bistecca di salmone" for example. Veal is frequently better than beef in Italy, so that a veal steak or "lombatina" is usually a good bet, unless you have reservations about the hormones in it or about the way the animals are raised. "Ossobuco" is knuckle of veal or beef and is a delicious Roman specialty. Fish is plentiful and good near the sea, and most of Italy is near the sea. Roman restaurants normally have fresh fish on Tuesdays and Fridays. Sogliola (sole), spigola (sea bass), and merluzzo (cod) are excellent. Chicken is now being produced industrially as in the US but in the country, when you can find the pollo ruspante (free range chicken), you realize what's been lost. Pigeon is a delicacy found more easily in smaller cities and towns. There's no elegant way to eat it, so if you're not ready to pick up the bones and go at it, don't bother. Roast lamb from the hills near Rome is young, tender, crisp and delicious. Lamb just doesn't get any better. Even people put off by the heavy taste of mutton usually like it. Rabbit is a common dish in Italy and very good, especially "alla cacciatore". The pig is to Italian cooking what marble is to sculpture, the material from which masterpieces are made. "Prosciutto" means ham, and it comes cooked (cotto) or raw (crudo), which is the porcine masterpiece. Prosciutto crudo is cured by being covered with salt and spices and left to age. Porchetta is simply an entire pig roasted with rosemary, pepper and garlic inside. Small cities throughout Umbria and Lazio have outdoor stalls where the porchetta is sliced and sold either by weight or in sandwiches (panini). Don't leave Italy without trying it. Pork chops and roast pork are usually excellent too, and far tastier than most of the beef that you'll find. Sausages vary from region to region. Forget them in Rome. Romans know as much about sausages as Nebraskans do about pastrami. Umbria is the place to find the world's best sausages. No horrible sweet spices in them, just garlic and pepper.

Vegetables-The variety of salads and vegetables in Italy is remarkable although they aren't always emphasized in restaurants. Cooked green vegetables are typically eaten at room temperature with oil and vinegar or lemon. See what's available and try everything! Don't miss the peperoni (peppers), finocchio(fennel), funghi (mushrooms), especially the roasted porcini as a meat substitute, carciofi (artichokes), especially alla Giuditta, bieta, wild asparagus, especially in omelets, broccoletti, cipolle (onions) cooked in an endless variety of ways, melanzane, zucchini, especially fried and marinated in oil, vinegar, garlic, parsley and basil. If you're here between November and early March, skip the Colosseum if you have to but don't leave Italy without trying the "broccoli con

aglio, olio e peperoncino” (Italian broccoli sauteed with garlic, oil and red pepper). It makes winter something to look forward to.

Desserts- Fresh fruit is the most common Italian dessert. Italians usually peel it to avoid the insecticides on and in the skin. Try: grapes and persimmons in the fall, tangerines and blood red oranges in the winter, lamponi (raspberries) and fragole (strawberries) in the summer. Pears cooked in red wine (pere cotte) are a nice change. Pastries and ice cream (gelati) dishes are too varied to list but tiramisu and crostata are among the most popular. Just ask to see the pastry wagon and point.

Coffee, or *caffè* in Italian, is espresso. If you insist on having the watery American variety, ask for Nescafe. *Caffè Hag* (pronounced hog) is decaffeinated espresso.

Wine- If you're a serious wine drinker you don't need our advice, but if you want some, get Burton Anderson's book, *Vino*. For everyone else, just a few tips. Nearly all restaurants have their own house wine. It's generally cheap but varies greatly from place to place. The Rome area generally has good white wine from Frascati, just to the south, but most of the local red isn't all that great. Some restaurants bring in good red wine from Tuscany. As a rule of thumb, don't drink house red in cheap restaurants. The white may not be anything special but it's usually drinkable.

White wine- We prefer Orvieto with its distinctive taste. Bigi is a good brand, despite being produced in quantity. The *abboccato* (semi-sweet) variety has much more of the distinctive flavor than the more fashionable and bland *secco* (dry) type. Fontana Candida is a similarly popular brand of the abundant Frascati wine. Soave from the Veneto is also usually good and certainly one of my favorites. There are some extraordinarily delicious white wines from Sardinia (the best we've had is *Terre Bianche*) which are low in alcohol content (as little as 9%) but have a flavor that can't be beat, ideal with fish and seafood.

Red wine- Chianti Classico such as Broglio or Santa Cristina is widely available and dependably good. Barolo is the richest, strongest and most full bodied of Italian wines, usually aged the longest and also among the most expensive. It's wonderful with a nice roast. Barbaresco and Dolcetto are other similar wines from the Piedmont region but both are less full bodied. We generally prefer Bardolino and Valpolicella, lighter, fruitier wines from the Verona area, but they vary considerably from one producer to another. Bolla, Bertani and especially Lamberti are good popular brands; others may not be. Our favorite wine is Rubesco Riserva of Lungarotti, from Torgiano near Perugia. It's relatively expensive by Italian standards, but if you see it, try it. They also make Tor di Giano, a nice white wine. But then, try them all! Wine is one of the best buys in Italy.

Paying the bill- To get it, you say “*il conto, per favore.*” Then look at it and check it. Things have changed a lot since the Red Cat's first edition was written. It used to be that restaurant checks were scribbled and unreadable, but the government intervened and now there must be a fiscal receipt from a machine. There still may be some confusion because Italian restaurants normally add a charge for bread and cover and then add a service charge on top of that. Some of this seems to be phasing out so check your bill to see if service has been included. If so, you can add a small tip if you want, but obviously it's not necessary.

For those on a budget, it's advisable to eat a good big meal whenever you sit down in a restaurant since the charges for bread, cover, service and beverages become relatively minor. To stop for a light meal with several children can be a shock since, while the pizza they eat may not cost much, the actual food may cost less than half of the total bill. For children, dieters, and anybody not very hungry, you can always order a half portion (mezzo porzione di...) pasta, which is half the price but often 70% of the quantity. Children's menus are unknown in Italy but you can always order two portions and divide it in three, etc. There are no package deals or combinations except the occasional tourist menu. You get and pay for what you ask for. You can do with it what you like.

Throughout the city there are tavole calde where you can get either a sandwich or hot food. It's self-service, either stand up or sit down but usually quick and inexpensive. Most small groceries will fix sandwiches (called panini) for you, or you can buy some cold cuts, bread and cheese and make your own. A liter of decent cheap wine costs about the same as three cans of soda or beer. Therefore drinking Coca-cola or its ilk in Italy is not only bad for your health and an affront to God, it doesn't even make any economic sense.

Pizza- There are pizza shops throughout most cities, which sell large quantities of various types of pizza across the counter. In Rome a few we recommend are:

- Frontoni in viale Trastevere
- Il Fornaio in via dei Baullari
- Terni in via Alessandria
- Gianfornaio in Piazza Ponte Milvio- this is a large bakery with a great assortment of bread which also makes pizza. It's a good place to stock up for picnics out of town to the north.

Pizza in these shops is very varied, not just standard cheese and tomato pizza with other toppings added. Some are made with only onions or potatoes for example so the seasonings vary accordingly.

There are also pizzeria restaurants, which are simply restaurants with a pizza oven (preferably wood burning). That oven usually gets put to use in the evening only. Perhaps the best known of these in Rome (to the English speaking crowd anyway since it's just down the street from the Pasquino, Rome's English language movie theater) is Ivo a Trastevere at 158 via S. Francesco.
