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EATING

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Dining out is a delicious way to enter into the Roman spirit. It's one of the finest things to do in Rome, despite all the other things jostling for your attention.

Romans love to eat, and eat well. Any Roman you ask will have an opinion on the best restaurants in town, the best ice cream and the best pizza. Eating is a sociable experience: long and lingering (a lazy lunch at a neighbourhood restaurant) or short and sizzling (a boisterous pizza with 49 friends). Romans also have high expectations of the kitchen, and fresh, local, seasonal ingredients are the norm, rather than the exception. It's a Mediterranean cuisine, with the addition of a penchant for deep-fried things and a special spot for innards. And of course there's pizza. Here pizzas are served thinner than you've ever seen them, wood-charred, with burnt edges and bubbling-hot toppings.

It used to be that Rome's eateries paid more attention to food than to décor or anything else, but the city has changed over the last few decades and there are ever-increasing opportunities to eat in gorgeous interiors, peruse fantastic wine lists and be wooed by sensitive service. There are also new-style trattorias, which update the simple neighbourhood formula with innovative menus and increased efforts to wine and dine their customers. That said, most Romans will always return to their favourite, well-worn trattoria, and there's no need to write a requiem for the gingham tablecloths and spindly tables on a cobbled street yet. Or for the waiter who slaps down your plate and scribbles your bill on the paper tablecloth. Often the best meal you have will be at the cheapest place, with the shortest menu – if you only serve deep-fried fish, you're going to do it well.

If your interest in Roman food goes further than just eating, consider signing up for a cooking course (see p288).

HISTORY

Petronius wrote a satirical account of the banquet of the newly wealthy Trimalchio in the 1st century AD, which fixed in the collective consciousness that the ancient Romans ate dormice seasoned with poppies and honey. But the fundamentals of Roman cuisine have remained the same throughout history, resting on the availability of local ingredients: olives, olive oil, pulses, cured pork, lamb, offal, vegetables, wild greens, *pecorino* cheese, ricotta, wood-baked bread, pasta and fish. Innards yes, mice no.

In the past, butchers who worked in the city abattoir were often paid in meat as well as money. But they got the cuts that the moneyed classes didn't want, the offal, and so developed ways to cook them – usually extremely slowly to develop the flavour and disguise their beginnings. The Roman staple *coda alla vaccinara* translates as 'oxtail cooked butcher's style'.

The growing numbers of pilgrims from the 14th century onwards meant a proliferation of taverns and *osterie* (neighbourhood inns), which usually specialised in one dish and *vino della casa* (house wine). The arrival of the potato and tomato from the New World in the 16th century didn't have an immediate impact, though obviously the Romans eventually started to use these novel vegetables.

Deep-frying is a staple of *cucina ebraico-romanesca* (Roman-Jewish cooking), and dates to the period between the 16th and 19th centuries when the Jews were confined to the city's ghetto. To add flavour to their limited ingredients – those spurned by the rich, such as courgette (zucchini) flowers – they began to fry everything from mozzarella to salted cod. *Bresaola* – wind-dried beef, often served as an antipasto – is another feature of Roman-Jewish cuisine, as a replacement for prosciutto.

Grand Tourists (rich pilgrims, in search of Art rather than God) arrived in the 18th century, and *osterie* began to get more sophisticated. Pizza only arrived post-WWII, introduced by southern migrants. The 1980s saw the development of *cucina creativa* – more experimental ways of cooking. Sometimes this was a simple twist, such as adding a different ingredient to a written-in-stone recipe or using an unlikely kind of pasta with a traditional sauce.

CELEBRATING WITH FOOD

In Rome, to have a good time you need food. Rites-of-passage celebrations all involve sumptuous spreads that are often laid on as much to impress as to enjoy, as anyone who has eaten their way through a nine-course wedding banquet can testify.

Festivals in Italy usually have ancient roots – when Christianity came along, many were just adapted to the new figurehead. The biggest festivals are Natale (Christmas), Pasqua (Easter) and Carnevale (the period leading up to Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent). The classic way to celebrate any feast day is to precede it with a day of eating *magro* (lean) to prepare for the overindulgence to come. On Vigilia (Christmas Eve), for example, tradition dictates that you eat little during the day and have a fish-based dinner as a prelude to the excesses of the 25th. Many special days have dishes associated with them: at Carnevale, the sweets to eat are *bigné* (fried cream-filled pastries); on Ferragosto (Feast of the Assumption; 15 August) Romans eat *pollo e peperoni* (chicken with peppers).

Most festivals have some kind of food involved, but many of them have no other excuse than food. These are called *sagre* (feasting festivals) and are usually celebrations of local specialities such as *porchetta* (a hog spit-roasted with herbs and served cold), hazelnuts, wine and sausages.

ON THE MENU

Home Comforts

Roman favourites are all comfort foods, deceptively simple and notably iconic. In the classic Roman comedy *I Soliti Ignoti* (Big Deal on Madonna Street; 1958), some inept thieves break through a wall to burgle a safe, but find themselves in a kitchen by mistake, and console themselves by cooking *pasta e ceci* (pasta with chickpeas). Try *pasta e ceci* in winter or if you're in need of the nutritional equivalent of a cuddle.

DOS & DON'TS

- Italians dress relatively smartly at most meals, so brush up when eating out.
- Bite through hanging spaghetti rather than slurp it up.
- Pasta is eaten with a fork only.
- Don't ask for salt unless you want to offend the cook. (It's hardly likely you'll need it: Rome was once a stop on Via Salaria, the Salt Road, and still loves its salt.)
- It's OK to eat pizza with your hands.
- In an Italian home you can, and should, *fare la scarpetta* (make a shoe) with your bread and wipe plates clean of sauces. If you want to be refined about it, use your fork. If you're in relaxed company, use your hands. At a restaurant it's not good manners to eat bread with your pasta, but most people do.
- If invited to someone's home, traditional gifts are a tray of *dolci* (sweets) from a *pasticceria* (pastry shop), a bottle of wine or a bunch of flowers.
- At restaurants, leave a tip: anything from 5% in a pizzeria to 10% in a more upmarket place. At the very least round up the bill.
- Don't be surprised to see *pane e coperto* (bread and cover charge; €1 to €5 per person) added to your bill.

In *Un Americano a Roma* (An American in Rome; 1954), Roman actor Alberto Sordi decides he wants to be an American. He comes home to a bowl of pasta and glass of wine prepared by his mama, but rejects it, saying Italian food is for peasants. He tries instead to eat bread with milk, mustard, yoghurt and marmalade, as he says the Americans do, before spitting it out with the immortal line: 'Maccarone, why are you looking at me? You provoke me and I shall destroy you!' A black-and-white photo of him forking the spaghetti into his mouth is probably more commonly reproduced than the Sistine Chapel.

But which sauce swayed Sordi? It could have been *spaghetti alla carbonara*, a gorgeous, barely-there sauce of egg, cheese and *guanciale* (cured pig's cheek). It was born out of poverty as this was, obviously, a less-sought-after cut of meat, used sparingly to give flavour. In these richer days, pancetta (cured bacon) is usually used instead. The egg is added raw, and stirred into the hot pasta to cook it. It's debatable why it's called *carbonara* – some say it's because it was the coal workers' favourite, and some that it's after the specks of black pepper that finish off the dish.

Another great belly-filling favourite is *butatini all'amatriciana* (with tomato sauce, onions, fried pancetta, cheese and chilli), which originated in Amatrice, a town east of Rome. The dish is an adaptation of *spaghetti alla gricia* (pasta with *pecorino* cheese, black pepper and pancetta), which comes from the town of Griciano in northern Lazio. A daring Amatrice cook added tomatoes, creating *amatriciana*.

Likewise, sparing amounts of prosciutto and sage are used to spark up the veal dish *saltimbocca* (the deliciously named 'leap in