

A Taste of Italy

Pizza and pasta, those indisputably delicious yet ubiquitous staples of any Italian menu, have only appeared as part of the country's cuisine as recently as in the past 100 years – adopted as a 'fast food' by increasingly busy Italian families. Yet, their prevalence on tables today belies the greater richness of Italy's food heritage, which itself reflects not only the country's extremes in geography but also its eclectic history, varied climates and its fascinating social and cultural identity.

Occupied at different times by the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans and the Barbarians among others; ruled by Popes and Emperors alike; and influenced by an abundance of trade with the East, with North Africa and with the rest of Europe, Italy has one of the most compelling histories of any country. Its food is as beguiling as its past, with each dish holding the genetic fingerprint to its origin, holding in its genes the secret to its history and the prevailing cultural, climatic and social conditions.

In Sicily, Venice and Genoa, where successful trade with the East introduced the use of pine nuts and raisins in their cuisine, delicious dishes such as *Caponatina*, *Coniglio Stimpirata*, have been passed on from generation to generation and incorporated into the word of mouth records of outstanding Italian cuisine. In Venice, *Sardine in Saor*, blends fresh fried sardines with pine nuts, onion, vinegar and raisins to delectable effect; while in Genoa raisins and pine nuts coalesce with fresh spinach in one of the region's delicacies.

In the North, where the 18th Century Austro-Hungarian Empire has left its most visible mark in places like today's German speaking, Alto Adige, bread dumplings such as *Canederli* are the Italian descendants of German knodels, blended with local ingredients. *Gulash* is a delightful Italian interpretation of the Hungarian dish. In Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, dishes such as *Cialzon* (ravioli) or *gnocchi* filled with succulent apricots, or plums served with sautéed butter and sugar, can trace their origins back to the Austro-Hungarian dumplings filled with fruits.

Moving to Southern Italy, once part of Magna Graeca, some of the most simple dishes can be found in other Mediterranean countries, whose culture they once shared; grilled lamb, offal, grilled squid, octopus salad, grilled aubergine or courgette, all dressed with local olive oil

In Sicily whose southern tip dips further south than the top of Tunisia, more pungent flavours infuse Italian food and find their roots in the Neapolitan trade with Africa and the Middle East. In Trapani, Sicily *Cuscusu* is a traditional local dish, part of their legacy of the North African conquest. Delicacies in the South were further refined by the presence of French chefs imported to cater for the demands of the King of Naples and his fervently aspirational neighbours, the nobility of Sicily. Noble dishes created for the region's elite by their French culinary experts persist in Italian cooking today in the guise of *Racanata* (gratinated) and *Gatto* (gateaux); and the art of moulding marzipan into the shape of fruits.

Intertwining with history's influence on Italy's rich cuisine are each region's unique ingredients: the delicious yet hapchance influences of climate and geography. *Cavalo nero*, Tuscan black cabbage, is a primitive form of curly-kale-like cabbage with dark green leaves that is not to be found anywhere outside of Tuscany. Traditionally cooked for many hours, its rounded cabbage flavour and rich dark, almost black colour distinguishes dishes such as *Ribollita* Tuscan cabbage soup and identifies as their source the undulating countryside in the Central West of Italy. *Barba di Frate* or *Agretti*, wild spinach found in the wet and marshy ground of Central Italy; *Lampascioni*, the wild onion found exclusively in Puglia; and *Moleche* soft shelled crabs found only in Venice, provide distinctive clues to the origins of any Italian dish and impart their own special characteristics to every dish in which they are found today.

As the cuisine has evolved, these local delicacies have been combined with other ingredients to create new and distinctive flavour sensations in simple yet delicious dishes. It is this blending, (in much the same way as in roasted pepper combined with roasted tomato which fuses to give a different flavour), that now underlies many of the great Italian dishes.

Grown in the mountains behind Venice, in the region of Veneto, *Radicchio* or red chicory blends with *Borlotti* beans, olive oil and a little good quality vinegar, to create *Pasta e Fagioli*, a sublime dish with a flavour far greater than the sum of its parts. In Verona and Brescia, beetroot brought together with ricotta creates a new explosion of flavour in dishes such as *Casunziei Appezzani* (ravioli with beetroot and ricotta). Further South, *Fava* beans make a formidable partner for *Catalogna* chicory when they are put together; and bayleaf when added to cabbage or cauliflower, and steamed with garlic and olive oil, imparts a flavour that cannot be achieved using any other herb. A completely new taste explosion is created when chargrilled artichoke is dipped into green, or wild, garlic blended with olive oil. It is precisely this knowledge and understanding of combinations, many of them simple yet powerful, derived over years of home cooking, that are the essence of traditional Italian food.

It was the poor that historically fostered the most ingenious of recipes over the years, to satisfy hungry mouths with the least amount of meat. Like elsewhere in the world, prime cuts of meat were the domain of the aristocracy or clergy, with the bulk of the population enjoying little opportunity to eat it. Ingenuity prevailed, culminating in delicious dishes such as *Polpette*, meatballs composed of tiny amounts of meat blended with cheese and breadcrumbs, bathed in a rich delicious vegetable sauce. The clergy themselves put their stamp on Italian foods creating their own flavour traditions, such as *Trota alla Certosina*. Many monastic orders, such as the Cistercian monks, grew their own vegetables, farmed, fished and built on the treasured traditions of preserving and cooking handed to them by the Romans. To this day, in Rome, the food continues to reflect its historic Roman characteristic of decadence, opulence, and exuberance.

Rice, polenta, maize, potatoes and pulses abound in each region of the country, and, imported over the years since the fifteenth century from various parts of the globe, have integrated to form the backbone of everyday meals. Rice arrived through the trading doors of Naples and Venice, eventually finding its perfect niche in the wetland areas along the rivers in Northern Italy. However, evolution extended this versatile ingredient and there are now four or five different varieties of rice grown and used throughout Italy, with each region boasting its own speciality. All are suited to creating creamy risotto dishes, combined with the local wild ingredients such as earthy porcini mushrooms in Piedmont; pumpkin in Veneto; or made with stock, bone marrow, wine and tangy parmesan cheese as in the Northern dish of *Risotto alla Milanese*.

Yet all of these dishes take time to prepare and it is Italian restaurants true to their craft that will keep the magic of Italian recipes alive in the future. History, culture, climate and geography are the unique ingredients that make Italian cuisine a truly magical experience, to be nurtured and preserved, and at the same time fostered as the basis of a new generation of culinary experiences.