

The Food in Rome

There is an enormous contrast between the grand past of this city and its unsophisticated, heartwarming staple diet. Dishes are based on the local produce, a wonderful variety of vegetables, baby lamb, and endless imaginative ways of cooking offal; even the classic scalloppine alla Romana lacks the opulence of the city's churches and palaces

The simple fact is that none of the cuisine of the powerful, aristocratic families who moved to Rome or of the Papal Court was ever part of the culinary tradition of the Roman populace. The ruling classes lived in their own world, employing professional chefs, and consuming the best cuts of meat

By the 15th century, Rome became the seat of the popes, who had jurisdiction over central Italy, attracting powerful Italian families who aspired to occupy the papal seat. During this period the city grew, and each pope desired to leave his mark through building palaces and churches. They employed chefs who prepared opulent meals using the best cuts from each of the 4 quarters of the animal. Huge quantities of meat were consumed, leaving the offal including head, tail and feet for the butchers (for whom this was often payment) to dispose of. They sold it to the local trattoria, which with ingenuity created wonderfully tasty dishes such as Coda alla Vaccinara (Oxtail, the butcher's way), Animelle Inpanate (Sweetbreads with breadcrumbs), Pajata (veal or lamb intestines) and other dishes prepared with liver and kidneys. This has become known as the Cucina del Quinto Quarto (the cuisine of the fifth quarter, a playfully ironic reference to the fact the hind and fore quarters were reserved for the wealthy)

The Jewish community, which has been in existence for over 2000 years, having been confined to ghettos, evolved its own cuisine, dishes such as Carciofi alla Giudea is testimony to this legacy

Sheep farming, an ancient practice, has ensured that lamb remains a delicacy in Rome, especially the milk-fed baby lamb, simply char-grilled; the intense flavour due to the wild grasses on which the sheep graze

Since Rome became the capital city of Italy in 1870, a new cuisine has evolved; people coming from neighbouring areas to settle in Rome, brought with them their own traditions eg Buccatini alla Matriciana (thick hollow spaghetti with pancetta and tomato) from Matrice, a town on the border with Abruzzi
Penne alla Carbonara (pasta with pancetta, egg and black pepper) a frugal dish from the Carbonari
Spaghetti cacio e pepe (Spaghetti with pecorino cheese and black pepper)

Time and prosperity has done little to change the Roman diet; and the local people still treasure their culinary tradition and the tastes that have been handed down over the generations. Today the simple dishes such as Coda alla Vaccinara can be found in the local trattoria as well as in more exclusive restaurants