

# Travel the World without Leaving Your Kitchen

## International Cooking Series

### The Italian Table

Most of us can passionately describe a delicious recipe or meal that someone in our family has passed down for generations and the ensuing joy of sharing the dish around the table. Exploring, learning, and embracing cultural food traditions, both our own and others', can broaden our perspectives about the history and cultures from around the world. Whether you experience these cultural differences in eating while traveling, while visiting a restaurant in your community, or by preparing them at home, it can help you celebrate the cultural diversity found in all our communities. So, let's travel the world without leaving your kitchens and experience the iconic dishes of Italy.



Some say Italy is full of the most beautiful locales in the world. And who can deny the remarkable ancient ruins of Pompeii; the chic charm of Capri; the Italian alps; the Italian lakes; the gems of the Renaissance in Florence's Academy Gallery, including Michelangelo's David; classical Rome, including the Colosseum; the marvel of the Leaning Tower of Pisa; the canals of Venice; high fashion in Milan; the opera; and glass sculptures of Murano. Then there's the agritourism of the Tuscan farms and wineries, the Parmesan cheese of Parma, and Italy as the leading exporter of balsamic vinegar. The list is endless. Pasta and pizza may be the most common and well-known Italian dishes in America, but Italy's culinary history is much richer and more diverse than these two staples. Italian fare is one of the oldest in the history of the world, yet it continues to evolve as one of the most popular global cuisines. For Italians, food isn't just about nourishment, it's

about what happens around the table with family and friends. It's about tradition, fresh and quality ingredients, simple recipes, and showcasing the natural flavors in each dish.

### History of Food

It all started in ancient Rome with the Mediterranean triad – grapes, grains, and olives. These ingredients were the foundation of the Roman diet and were paired with large amounts of vegetables, cheeses, honey, and breads; meat was consumed only every now and then. In the Middle Ages, pasta became popular as an easily preserved food, and Arabic influences introduced dried fruits and spices to the tables. In the 17th century, tomatoes were added to pasta, leading to the eventual creation of tomato sauce, a staple in Italian cuisine today.



Italians immigrated to America in the late 19th century and introduced Italian food. Fast forward to the 20th century, when soldiers were returning from Italy after World War II, and Italian American immigrants began opening restaurants to provide soldiers with the foods they enjoyed abroad: spaghetti, ravioli, lasagna, and pizza. In the 1950s and 1960s, salami, capocollo, mortadella, and pepperoni became popular in delis. During the 1970s and 1980s, eggplant parmigiana, fettuccine Alfredo, shrimp scampi, chicken piccata, and the calzone were introduced. Italian food has been stitched into the fabric of American culture. Over time, Italians have adapted their old family recipes to fit the tastes of a new country. While not entirely authentic, this Italian American cuisine inspires home cooks to enjoy the flavors of a country with a rich history for tradition and bold flavors.

## Regional Differences

Just like the United States, there are regional differences in food throughout Italy. The country is comprised of 20 regions, each with unique and distinctive dishes. Italian dishes vary by region depending on several things: culture of the area, geography, climate, agriculture, and history. However, regardless of region, Italians prioritize fresh, local ingredients that can be prepared simply and enjoyed

with family and friends in an unrushed manner. In your visits to your local restaurant, or if you are lucky enough to visit Italy, you may see these words on menus.

- apertivo - small plates of olives, cheeses, and nuts with a bubbly drink
- antipasto - a starter, often a charcuterie platter with cured meats, specialty cheeses, and pickled vegetables or bruschetta
- primi - hot food, such as pasta, risotto, gnocchi, or soup
- secondi - meat, seafood, or vegetarian main dishes
- contorni - vegetable-based side dishes, raw or cooked
- insalata - salad, if not served as a contorni
- formaggi e frutta - cheese and fruit
- dolce - dessert, such as tiramisu, panna cotta, or gelato
- caffè - strong espresso, with milk and sugar
- digestivo - limoncello or grappa, to aid in digestion.

These are the structured courses of an Italian meal, designed not just for sustenance but as a culinary experience in good company. Some meals are known to last hours! It's easy to see why Italian fine dining is slow and orchestrated, so you can relish all the small, fresh, simply prepared dishes.



## Northern Italy

In northern Italy, butter is more common than olive oil, and along with dairy products and cheeses, it is used for preparing cream sauces. Rosemary and sage are used abundantly in northern dishes to provide flavor, and wild mushrooms are popular additions. While pasta is everywhere in Italy, polenta, risotto, and gnocchi are often prepared in its place in this region.

- Polenta, finely ground yellow cornmeal, is a popular grain used in a variety of dishes. Prepared similarly to grits, this versatile grain can be cooked and served to compliment a dish, or it can be the star. To prepare polenta, use a 3:1 liquid to grain ratio.
- Risotto is prepared using arborio rice. Arborio absorbs less water, giving it a creamy texture. It takes time to prepare, but can be served with meat, vegetables, fish, or seafood. To prepare risotto, use a 4:1 liquid to grain ratio.
- Gnocchi is a type of dumpling that is prepared by combining potatoes with flour to form a soft dough. To cook it, you simply fill a large pot with water, bring it to a boil, and drop a few in at a time until they float to the surface. Like risotto, gnocchi are very versatile! Add in vegetables, mushrooms, cheeses, and sauces for additional flavors.
- Truffles are generally classified as mushrooms or fungi. The trees they grow on, usually oak and hazelnut trees, take in phosphorus in return for sugar which gives the truffles their unique, earthy flavor. Black truffles are better when cooked, while white truffles have a more delicate flavor and command a higher price. Pigs were traditionally used to hunt truffles because they are beckoned by a chemical that reminds them of mating season, but dogs can also be trained to hunt truffles.
- Pesto is generally made from basil, pine nuts, garlic, olive oil and Parmigiano-Reggiano and/or Pecorino Romano cheeses. This familiar pesto originated in Genoa, Italy, in the province of Liguria. Pesto Genovese is a traditional Italian sauce for dressing pasta. It can be used as a sauce for pasta, a base for pizza, or as a condiment for sandwiches, but it is delicious served with fish, meats, vegetables, or in soups.



## Basil Pesto

Yield: 6 servings

Prep time: 20 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per serving:* 200cal, 240g fat, 10mg cholesterol, 260mg sodium, 23g carbohydrates, 4g protein

### Ingredients

- 2 cups fresh basil, stems trimmed and loosely packed
- ¼ cup toasted pine nuts
- 2 to 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- 2/3 cup Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
- 1/3 cup plus 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper

### Instructions

1. In a food processor or blender, add basil, pine nuts, garlic, and Parmesan cheese.
2. Pulse until barely combined, then add 1/3 cup oil and blend thoroughly.
3. Allow the machine to continue running and add remaining oil and cheese, plus the salt and pepper.
4. Besides serving over pasta for a great meal or side dish, pesto is a great dipping or pizza sauce, salad dressing, or sandwich spread.

**Note:** Refrigerate for up to two weeks or freeze for up to three months. Throughout Italy there are hundreds of pesto recipes featuring all sorts of herbs, vegetables, and nuts. Quite popular in the U.S. is the use of different nuts, such as walnuts, almonds, and pistachios.

## Southern Italy

In southern Italy, olive oil is used almost exclusively in cooking. Fresh pasta is the foundation of most meals and is often topped with a sauce prepared using different hot peppers to build flavors and add a bit of spice. Basil and oregano are common herbs used to provide flavor, and olives are a staple for those in the region.

Pizza originated in southern Italy, though not the kind loaded with toppings like we see in America. Neapolitan pizza originated in the city of Naples, along the southwestern coast of Italy near Pompeii. The simplest and most popular version is a basic, thin-crust dough topped with tomato sauce, fresh mozzarella slices, fresh basil, and olive oil – the Margherita pizza is named after Queen Margherita of Savoy. The pizza resembles the colors of the Italian flag. A true Neapolitan pizza must be made with authentic ingredients in a wood fired oven.

## Margherita Pizza

Yield: 2 - 12-inch pizzas

Prep time: 1 hour 30 minutes

Cook time: 10 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per pizza:* 340cal, 217g fat, 30mg cholesterol, 420mg sodium, 342g carbohydrates, 13g protein

### Dough Ingredients

- *2½ cups all-purpose flour*
- *1 packet (2¼ teaspoons) active dry yeast*
- *pinch sugar*
- *¾ teaspoon salt*
- *1 cup of warm water, 110 degrees F*
- *2 tablespoons olive oil*

### Topping Ingredients

- *4 large fresh tomatoes, skins removed and deseeded, if preferred*
- *1 cup lightly packed basil leaves, destemmed, and left whole or sliced*



- *12 ounces of fresh mozzarella, sliced*
- *¼ teaspoon salt*
- *2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, divided*

### Instructions

1. In a medium bowl, combine all dough ingredients, except the oil, using clean hands. Knead well until dough is a smooth, firm ball, about 10 minutes. If it is too sticky, add 1 tablespoon of flour at a time and continue kneading until a dough ball is formed. If it is too dry, add 1 tablespoon of water at a time and continue kneading until the dough ball is formed.
2. Coat a large bowl lightly with oil or cooking spray. Add the dough and turn to coat with oil. Let rise at least two hours in a warm place or until doubled in size. After the dough has doubled in size, preheat your oven and pizza stone to 450 degrees F.
3. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and divide in half. With the tips of your fingers, spread each piece out until it is 12 inches in diameter.
4. Once the dough is prepared, squeeze or slice two tomatoes on each pizza, and divide other ingredients evenly before adding them to the pizza crust.
5. Place the pizzas on a pizza stone that has been in a 450 degrees F oven for 30 minutes. Return to oven and bake for seven to 10 minutes or until the crust is golden brown and the cheese is melted.

**Note:** Since it is a simple pizza, quality ingredients are important.





Citrus fruits, including lemons, clementines, blood oranges, mandarins, and others, are popular and well known for their many uses in Italian cuisine. From marmalades, to candied fruits dipped in chocolate, to limoncello – a famous lemon liqueur – citrus fruits are ingrained in the culture of southern Italy. Citrus gardens are popular among tourists to view different varieties of citrus fruits and to sample fresh products made using them.

## Granita (Italian Lemon Ice)

Yield: 6 servings

Prep time: 2 hours plus

Cook time: 10 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per serving: 160cal, 42g carbohydrates*

### Ingredients

- 2 cups water
- 2 cups lemon juice, strained
- 1¼ cups sugar

### Instructions

1. In a medium pan, over medium-high heat, bring the water to a boil. Add sugar, and heat until dissolved. Add the lemon juice. Remove from heat and cool before placing in the pan for freezing.
2. In an 11-inch-by-7-inch rectangular pan, add the cooled mixture. Freeze 20 to 30 minutes.
3. Remove from freezer. Use a fork to break apart the ice crystals that are starting to form. Return to freezer for 20 to 30 minutes.
4. Continue to break apart the crystals and refreeze at least two more times.
5. Serve frozen but fluffed with a fork. Garnish with mint or berries.

**Note:** You can use bottled lemon juice, but fresh lemons are best. It will take about a dozen lemons to squeeze 2 cups of lemon juice, but this will be dependent on the size of the lemons. You can cover the granita and keep it frozen for up to one month. Fluff with a fork before service.

# Pasta

Italy is home to thousands of pasta varieties, fresh and dried alike. While some are handmade from region to region, others are more well known worldwide. The different shapes of pasta are designed to hold sauce in the best way possible. Additionally, many of these pasta shapes have other uses and can be incorporated into soups, salads, and baked dishes or casseroles.

Name	Key Characteristics	Pairings
<b>LONG AND SKINNY</b>		
Capellini (Angel Hair)	Long, thin, fine shape	Simple, light sauces such as pesto; light seafood ingredients such as scallops
Linguine	Long, flat, narrow, more so than fettuccine	Pesto or other oil-based sauces, fish sauces, as part of stir-fry dishes; seafood dishes
Spaghetti	Long, thin	Any sauce
<b>LONG RIBBONS</b>		
Lasagna	Wide, flat sheet used for baked dish with same name	Meat, cheese, cream, vegetables
Pappardelle	Flat and wide	Hearty sauces and ingredients – meat or ragu sauce, eggplant
<b>TWISTS</b>		
Fusilli	Spiral, spindle-like pasta with grooves	Any sauce
Rotini	Short, corkscrew-like pasta	Pairs well with most sauces
<b>TUBES</b>		
Cavatappi	S-shaped tube looks like a corkscrew; ridges around exterior to hold onto sauces	Any sauce, particularly those that include vegetables and lean proteins
Macaroni (Elbow macaroni)	Short, semicircular shape	Any sauce
Penne	Cylinder-shaped with angled edges	Chunky meat or tomato sauces
Rigatoni	Short, wide tubes with ridges on outside	Chunkier sauces with meats and vegetables
Ziti	Cylinder-shaped, straight edges	Fresh, light sauces like olive oil or a simple fresh tomato sauce
<b>MINI</b>		
Gnocchi	Mini pasta dumpling made of wheat, eggs, and potatoes	Tomato-based or pesto sauces
Orzo	Small, rice-shaped; firm texture	Versatile ingredients
<b>FILLED</b>		
Ravioli	Square or rounded pillow-shaped pockets	Stuffed with meats and/or cheeses, topped with light or heavy sauces or butter and/or oil
Tortellini	Ring-shaped	Stuffed with meat, cheese, or vegetables and served in broth; cream and butter, or tomato cream sauce
<b>OTHER</b>		
Conchiglie (Shells)	Shaped like a conch shell; many sizes	Thick sauces, meat sauces
Farfalle (Bowtie or Butterfly)	Small rectangles pinched in the center	Cream-based sauces or fresh tomato sauces
Orecchiette	‘Little ears’	Pancetta and ricotta; cream-based sauces
Rotelle (Wagon Wheel)	Wheel-shaped	Meat, cream, or seafood sauces

## Other Common Italian Foods

Polenta, sometimes referred to as “Italian grits,” is one of the earliest and simplest foods prepared in Italy. In ancient Rome, peasants prepared this dish, and it was a staple of the Roman military. Over time, polenta became a popular staple of the North because of its versatility. It can be served on its own or topped with various ingredients.

Ragù, in the traditional form, is a simple meat-based sauce that originated in Bologna, Italy. Today, there are many varieties of the sauce in different regions of Italy and beyond. The base of a traditional ragù is soffritto, a vegetable mixture of onion, celery, and carrot. The other main ingredients are tomatoes, meats (beef, pork, or veal), cooking liquid (wine, milk, or broth), and herbs. The sauce then cooks for several hours to let the meat become soft and to let the flavors blend.

Focaccia is an oven-baked flatbread often brushed with olive oil and topped with herbs. Popular herbs include rosemary and oregano, either fresh or dried. Other toppings, such as tomatoes and olives, can be added to enhance the flavor.

Tiramisu began as a pudding-like dessert with espresso, to be served as a pick me up to make it through the day. Today, this popular Italian dessert consists of layers of sponge cake soaked in coffee and brandy or liqueur with grated chocolate and mascarpone cheese.

## Parmesan Polenta

Yield: 8 servings

Prep time: 15 minutes

Cook time: 30 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per serving:* 180cal, 9g fat, 20mg cholesterol, 410mg sodium, 20g carbohydrates, 4g protein

### Ingredients

- 1 teaspoon extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ small yellow onion, diced
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 cup yellow cornmeal
- 3 cups vegetable broth
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter



- ½ cup shredded Parmesan cheese
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper

### Instructions

1. In a medium pan, over medium-high heat, heat the olive oil until shimmering.
2. Add onions, and cook 8 to 10 minutes, or until translucent.
3. Add garlic, and stir for 30 seconds.
4. Add the cornmeal, and toast for 2 to 3 minutes, stirring to prevent scorching.
5. Add 1 cup of broth, stirring until the liquid is absorbed. Repeat until all the broth has been added and the cornmeal is smooth, about 20 to 25 minutes.
6. Remove cornmeal mixture from the heat.
7. Combine butter, cheese, and spices until smooth. Add to hot cornmeal mixture, and stir until combined.
8. Serve hot as a base for Ragu sauce.

**Note:** Polenta can also be served as a side or as the base for many fragrant sauces. Store covered in the refrigerator up to three days.





## Ragù

Yield: 4 servings

Prep time: 30 minutes

Cook time: 45 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per serving:* 60cal, 2g fat, 250mg sodium, 8g carbohydrates, 1g protein

### Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 celery stalks, diced
- 2 large carrots, peeled and diced
- 2 small onions, diced
- 2 pounds fresh tomatoes, peeled, deseeded, and crushed
- 1 tablespoon dried basil
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 cup vegetable broth
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper

**Note:** If you are substituting fresh herbs for dried, use three times the quantity of dried herbs called for in the recipe. For dishes that require a long cooking

time, add delicate-flavored and ground herbs at the end of the cooking time so their flavor will not escape with the steam.

### Instructions

1. In a large saucepan, over medium heat, add the oil and heat until shimmering.
2. Add the soffritto (celery, carrots, and onion). Cook until slightly browned, about 10 minutes.
3. Add remaining ingredients, stirring to combine.
4. Reduce heat to low, cover with a lid and simmer for about 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove bay leaf before service.
5. Serve chunky sauce over polenta.

**Note:** You can serve this recipe over pasta, as well. For a smoother, thinner sauce, blend with a stick blender. You can easily double this recipe and freeze it for up to three months. You may use canned tomatoes for this recipe, but fresh is best. Substitute a 28-ounce can of crushed tomatoes. For a thicker sauce, you can remove the lid and simmer until reduced. Or add 1 tablespoon of tomato paste or 2 tablespoons of tomato puree at the end, and cook until you have the desired consistency.

# Focaccia Bread

Yield: 6 servings

Prep time: 2 hours plus

Cook time: 30 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per serving:* 140cal, 5g fat, 100mg cholesterol, 197mg sodium, 22g carbohydrates, 3g protein

1 piece: 95 calories, 4g fat (1g saturated fat), 61mg sodium, 13g carbohydrate, 2g protein.

## Ingredients

- 1  $\frac{1}{3}$  cups warm water, 110 degrees F
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 package (2 $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoons) active dry yeast
- 3 $\frac{1}{2}$  cups all-purpose flour
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup extra-virgin olive oil for recipe
- 1 teaspoon dried rosemary
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil to coat bread
- 1 tablespoon dried rosemary

## Instructions

1. In a small bowl, combine  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup water and sugar. Whisk in yeast, and let rest until it looks foamy, about 10 minutes.
2. In a large mixing bowl, combine the rest of the water, flour, salt, and oil, plus the yeast mixture. Use a dough hook and combine the ingredients on low speed. Once the dough comes together, continue to knead for 5 to 6 minutes on medium speed until it becomes a smooth and soft ball. If dough is too sticky, add more flour, 1 tablespoon at a time.
3. Remove dough ball and coat the mixing bowl with 1 tablespoon oil.
4. Add the dough ball back to the mixing bowl and cover with a damp towel. Let it rest until it has doubled in size, about 1 hour.
5. Preheat oven to 425 degrees F.



6. Brush a 13-inch-by-9-inch baking pan with 1 tablespoon oil. Add the dough and keep pressing to fit the pan, making indentations with your fingers. This will give the characteristic look of focaccia bread.
7. Let the dough rise until doubled in size, about 30 minutes.
8. Cover with remaining 2 tablespoons of oil and sprinkle with rosemary. Bake the dough until the top of the bread is golden brown, about 25 to 30 minutes.
9. Remove the focaccia from the oven, and let it cool before cutting and serving.

**Note:** To store leftover focaccia bread, place in an airtight container for up to two days. Or freeze for up to one month.





## Tiramisu

Yield: 6 servings

Prep time: 1 hour

Cook time: 45 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per serving:* 237cal, 24g fat, 10mg cholesterol, 197mg sodium, 2g carbohydrates, 5g protein

### Ingredients

- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 3 pasteurized shell eggs, separated
- 2 tablespoons brandy or cognac
- 2 cups brewed espresso, cooled, divided
- 9 ounces mascarpone cheese
- 30 ladyfingers, such as Savoiardi®
- 3 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
- ¼ cup dark chocolate shavings

### Instructions

1. In a mixing bowl, combine egg yolks and sugar. Use an electric mixer to beat the mixture 2 to 3 minutes or until the eggs are pale yellow in color. Add the mascarpone and liquor, beating 3 to 5 minutes or until well blended.
2. In a separate mixing bowl, beat the egg whites until stiff peaks form. Carefully by hand, fold the egg whites into the mascarpone mixture.
3. In a small bowl, mix espresso and alcohol. Note: You will use this mixture to gently dip your lady fingers one at a time, as you put the dish together.
4. Cover six small dessert bowls with 1/3 of the mascarpone mixture. Dip ladyfingers in espresso. Add the ladyfingers on top of the mascarpone layer. Sprinkle with chocolate shavings. Continue layering until all the ingredients are used. Decorate with a light dusting of cocoa powder.
5. Refrigerate at least two hours before serving.

**Note:** Make sure to use pasteurized shell eggs. Raw eggs may contain Salmonella, a type of harmful bacteria. The alcohol may be left out of this recipe with little flavor change. The recipe may also use a 6-inch-by-8-inch glass baking dish or loaf pan for layering, or you can arrange on a serving platter in 2 horizontal rows of 6 with 2½ ladyfingers in the opposite direction on both ends to form a rectangular shape.



# Food and Health

Increasing evidence suggests that the Mediterranean diet might reduce the risks of metabolic syndrome, atherosclerosis, cancer, diabetes, obesity, pulmonary, and cognitive diseases. The Blue Zones Project® identified communities around the world where individuals were enjoying an increase in lifespan, often past 100. Sardinia, Italy, is one of these communities. Their secret may be the generous amounts of vegetables, beans, and legumes, along with smaller amounts of dairy and meat products. Couple their Mediterranean diet with copious amounts of outdoor exercise and you may find the answer to the average eight-year increase in lifespan in both men and women. For more information about the Blue Zones Project, check out *The Blue Zones Challenge* by Dan Buettner.

Italian cuisine has influenced food culture around the world and is viewed as a form of art by many. Remember, part of the Italian tradition is to cook and dine together, enjoying fresh ingredients and the conversations of family and friends. The staples included here can be combined nicely for a common Italian meal. Other traditional Italian foods to explore include Bolognese Ragù, Spaghetti alla Carbonara, Pollo alla Cacciatora, Osobuco alla Milanese, Parmigiana di Melanzane, and Baccalà Mantecato. There are many Italian recipes available at your local library or from websites and food blogs. Not all will be authentic or traditional, but exploring the culture and foods of modern-day Italy will be a treat!

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