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Regional Specialties

Each region in Italy has its own distinct and delicious food specialties. From Valle d'Aosta near the Alps, influenced by Switzerland and France, to Sicily in the sun-drenched Mediterranean, the variations in Italian food are significant. Each region has mastered its dishes using local ingredients enhanced by the region's climate and terrain. Come take a walk through Italy and discover the many unique foods this country produces.

Valle d'Aosta

At the top of the Italian "boot," Valle d'Aosta has been influenced by its proximity to the Alps, Switzerland and France. The least populated region in Italy, its mountainous terrain and cold climate has resulted in robust, hearty dishes. Fontina cheese, fonduta (fondue), spiced sausages, wild game, berries and polenta are just some of the comfort foods the Alpine mountains and valleys boast. Valpelline soup is a typical dish of this mountain area, consisting of layers of old stale bread with fontina cheese, vegetable broth, melted butter and cinnamon. Carbonade, salt-cured beef cooked with onions and red wine in a rich stew, and minestra di castagne e riso, a thick soup of rice cooked in milk with chestnuts, are two other traditional dishes.

Piemonte

Similar to Valle d'Aosta, Piemonte's proximity to the Alps has necessitated robust meals. At "the foot of the mountains" (literal translation of Piemonte) Piemonte's hills and valleys are home to wild game, outstanding wines, gorgonzola, rice and truffles. Cows, goats and sheep abound and graze in Alpine meadows. The cuisine is simple but hearty and flavorful. Traditional dishes include bagna cauda (anchovy and garlic dip), brasato al Barolo (braised beef with Barolo) and tagliolini al tartufo bianco (tagliolini with white truffle). Other favorites include hazelnuts and a variety of cheeses, such as Grana Padano, Taleggio and Robiola. Desserts include krumiri biscuits, marron glacés (Cuneo chestnuts prepared in a glaze) and gianduiotto chocolate.

Liguria

Coastline and mountains line Liguria's region and contribute to its unique and varied cuisine. The port of Genoa brings in the fresh fish that dominates the Ligurian menu, accompanied by fresh local vegetables, herbs and olives. Ligurian basil grown in the breezes of the sea has made Genoa renowned for its pesto sauce, and the stable, sunny climate results in refined olive oils rivaling Tuscany's. Sweets include baci from Alassio, small balls of hazelnut dough combined with a fine layer of dark chocolate, and pandolce Genovese, similar to panettone.

Lombardia

Molise

Home to the bustling, elegant city of Milan, Lombardia hosts an abundance of fine restaurants. Butter is the primary cooking fat, and cream sauces are more popular here than in other regions of the country. Rice, which is grown in the Po River valley, is served in famous risotto dishes such as Risotto alla Milanese made with saffron. Fresh fish from local rivers and lakes, choice salami from Cremona and the world-famous ossobuco (braised veal shank) are a just a few of the dishes that are unmistakably Lombardian. These great dishes are topped off with such desserts as torrone (nougat) from Cremona, the “brutti e buoni” (ugly and good) almond biscuits from Varese and panettone from Milan.

Piemonte**Puglia****Sardegna****Sicilia****Toscana****Trentino Alto Adige****Umbria****Valle d'Aosta****Veneto**

Trentino-Alto Adige

The cuisine of this region is influenced by its proximity to Germany. You are likely to find sauerkraut, frankfurters and goulash on the menu in Alto Adige along with traditional country bacon smoked over a wood fire. Crystal-clear water from the Eastern Alps makes an ideal birra (beer) that is growing in popularity. Country breads, dumplings and thick soups are among the Trentino hearty fare, followed with fresh fruit from the region's abundant cherry, plum and apple trees. Typical desserts include strudel filled with apples, krapfen (filled with marmalade) and Zelten (sweet bread filled with candy and dry fruit).

Friuli-Venezia Giulia

Nestled in the northeastern corner of Italy and bordered by Venice, Slovenia and Austria. Friuli Venezia-Giulia has a diverse menu. Meats, dairy products, sausages, polenta and legumes are the basis of Friuli's savoury cuisine, relying on simple recipes and genuine products. Many of the tangy flavors and savory dishes of Venezia-Giulia – Viennese sausage, strudel pastries, goulash – are strongly influenced by its central-European and Slavic neighbors. San Daniele prosciutto made only by 27 small producers within the town of San Daniele is made delicious by the quality of the pigs, fresh air from the nearby Alps and humidity of the Adriatic Sea. Other renowned products include the cheese of Montasio and the typical frico (a potato, onion and cheese fricassée).

Veneto

The main difference between the cuisines of Venice and other parts of Veneto is that the former features seafood while the latter favors heavier meat-based dishes. In general, Venetian cuisine is based on four basics: polenta, rice, beans and vegetables. Risotto, the undisputed star of Venetian cuisine, can be made with anything, depending on tastes and seasons, such as peas, seafood, mussels or scampi. Baccalà, dried, salted cod fish, is widely served throughout the area. Polenta, a modest dish made from cornmeal, is a staple of much of northern Italy, but nowhere is it more popular than in the Veneto region. Veneto's contribution to Italy's pasta culture is a style of fresh pasta called bigoli, a long, spaghetti-style pasta with a hole in its middle. Other favorites include Asiago cheese, Vialone rice, the heart-shaped cherries of Marostica, San Zeno chestnuts and Verona Pandoro (cake).

Emilia-Romagna

Prized Emilian cows graze, chickens lay fresh golden eggs and fields yield the ingredients that play a part in the region's mouthwatering foods. Romagna, the mountainous country that stretches to the Adriatic Sea in the east, offers aromatic herbs, hearty game and fresh fish from the coast. Each of the major cities here contributes a classic to the menu: Parma proudly presents its famous prosciutto; Bologna its delicious mortadella and meat-based ragù; and the production of nutty, savory Parmigiano Reggiano cheese is limited to the Emilia-Romagna region to ensure authenticity. The piadina, an unleavened flatbread, is best eaten piping hot; filled with greens, pan-fried vegetables, cheese or ham and cured meats of all kinds. Aceto balsamico, or balsamic vinegar, is one of the cornerstones of Italian gastronomy, produced exclusively in the province of Modena according to the same time-honored method that vinegar-makers have used for centuries. Famous desserts include amaretti cookies of San Geminiano, torta nera (a chocolate torte) and lupini (balls of sweet dough).

Toscana

Tuscan meals are determined by what is fresh at the vendor's stalls. From grapes, olives and porcini mushrooms to game, herbs, cheeses and pasta, its plentiful bounty is on display at markets all around the fertile countryside. Olives have been cultivated on the rolling Tuscan hills since the seventh century B.C., so extra virgin Tuscan olive oil, with its fruity aroma of almonds, artichokes and mature fruit, is one of the finest and most valued in Italy. To the beef connoisseur, few cuts of meat are as exceptional as those from the cattle raised in Tuscany's Chianna valley. Panforte or "strong bread" is the famous confectionery of Tuscany but is now enjoyed all over Italy, especially during the Christmas season. After dinner, Tuscans enjoying dipping hard almond cookies into Vin Santo ("holy wine"), a medium-dry-to-sweet dessert wine.

Umbria

Umbria is comprised of shady forests, still lakes, green pastures and golden fields. This beautiful region is famous for pork delicacies such as sausages and delicious prosciutto hams that are great accompaniments to the prized black Norcia truffle and the small, tender Castelluccio lentil. Typical cheeses include fresh or seasoned goat cheeses, Scamorza, seasoned sheep's milk cheeses and "formaggi di fossa" or cheeses that have been aged underground. Sweets include "Torcolo di San Costanzo" (a delicacy filled with candied fruit, grapes and anise), "ciaramicola" (the ring-shaped Easter cake with a pink heart that is the symbol of Perugia) and "faratu de fare" (a chocolate and cinnamon pudding made from spelt). Umbria is also home to Perugia, synonymous with fine chocolate and the Perugia "kiss."

Marche

In the green valleys, flatlands, Apennine Mountains, hill towns, fishing ports and seaside resorts of this eastern Italian region, local cuisine caters to a more sophisticated palate than some of its neighboring regions. With a penchant for all things stuffed, natives of Marche savor the complexities of suckling pig with wild herbs and garlic or olives filled with Parmesan, nutmeg and veal. The local cuisine of the Marche region reserves a place of honor for the Casciotta d'Urbino, made primarily from ewe's and cow's milk. The region's most renowned dish, however, is anconetani vincisgrassi, the ancestor of all lasagna dishes in the entire country it is layered with truffles or veal sweetbreads, chicken giblets and béchamel sauce. Fish lovers will want to savour brodetto marchigiano, a princely soup of Adriatic fish, in a red version from the areas of Pesaro and Ancona, with tomato, and a yellow version from Ascoli, with saffron. Sweets employ the flavours and techniques of the Renaissance. A first-rate dessert wine is Vernaccia di Serrapetrona, one of Italy's few red sparkling wines.

Lazio

Although the lure of Rome can be strong, Lazio also offers an extraordinary variety of landscapes: wide beaches, great pine woods, mountains, gentle hills and expansive plains. Traditional cooking in Lazio reflects the meals of shepherds and farmers, which were made from a few ingredients, prepared simply. A good morning in the region of Lazio can't start without a breakfast of maritazzi (exquisite sweets filled with raisins and pine nuts, whose origin appears to go all the way back to the Middle Ages). The peas, beans, celery, artichokes and lettuces found in Roman markets are exceptional, perhaps because of the sun-drenched, volcanic soil of the region. Some of Italy's best-known pasta dishes originated in Lazio – Bucatini alla matriciana, Spaghetti alla Carbonara and Spaghetti alla Puttanesca (streetwalker's spaghetti, so named for the local prostitutes who were said to enjoy its nourishing qualities).

Abruzzo

Rugged mountains, palm-lined beaches and charming hill towns combine to make Abruzzo one of Italy's most beautiful and geographically diverse regions. The cooking of Abruzzo is both varied and refined. Pasta, vegetables and meat (especially lamb

and pork) are the staples of Abruzzo cuisine, and many delicious lamb dishes and aromatic cheeses, such as Pecorino (sheep's milk) and Scamorza (often smoked), are rooted in the pasture farming. Maccheroni alla chitarra (guitar string macaroni) is an egg pasta cut using thin steel wires attached to a wooden frame and is traditionally served with lamb tomato and peperoncino sauce. Peperoncino, a red chili pepper, is a key ingredient in the local cuisine. Parrozzo is a famous local dessert, a soft cake made with flour, butter, eggs, sugar and almonds, covered with chocolate. The town of Sulmona, Italy's confectionary capital since the Renaissance, is known for producing the country's best confetti, or sugar-coated Jordan almonds.

Molise

Mountains and hilly terrain have kept Molise somewhat separated from the rest of the country, and most travelers have never visited here. Very little meat is eaten in Molise, and Molisani dishes reflect simplicity and a quick preparation time. Vegetables and cheese dominate the cuisine, along with pasta, grains and fresh fruits. A unique dish to Molise is one called p'lenta d'iragn, a white polenta made with potatoes and wheat and served with a tomato sauce. Another is calconi di ricotta rustica, ravioli stuffed with ricotta, provolone and prosciutto, then fried in oil. The cheeses of Molise include scamorza, mateca and burrino. Sweet endings include mostarda d'uva (a typical country made grape jam), eaten as is by the spoonful or combined with biscuits and desserts. Cauciuni (sweets filled with a chickpea dough) and cippillati (oven baked ravioli with an amarena sour cherry jam filling) may also round out a meal.

Campania

This region's beautiful coastline includes the islands of Capri and Ischia, and its interior includes such destinations as the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum, Mt. Vesuvius and Naples. Fresh fish and seafood (such as octopus, mussels and baby clams) from the Gulf of Naples, San Marzano tomatoes and other vegetables grown in the region's fertile volcanic soil, aromatic buffalo mozzarella cheese and of course, pizza and pasta (especially spaghetti), are the region's best-loved foods. Born in Naples more than 300 years ago, pizza is often thought of as "genuine Italian food" by non-Italians, but this beloved food was little known in Italy (outside of Naples) until the 1970s. The Massa Lubrense lemon is the Sorrento lemon produced and sold under the protection of the European Union and is used in the famous limoncello liqueur. The herbal liqueur strega, which is enjoyed throughout Italy, is produced in the capital town of Benevento from a secret recipe that has been closely guarded by the Alberti family for 140 years. In terms of sweets, rich flaky sfolgiate [puffs], deliciously soft babà and pastiera are favorites.

Puglia

Pugliese cooking makes the most of the region's golden wheat fields, plentiful olive groves, ripe vineyards and close proximity to the Adriatic and the Ionian seas. The region's dry, hot climate makes it ideal for growing grano duro, or durum wheat. This dense wheat with a high protein content and gluten strength make it the choice for premium pasta. The Puglian climate also makes it ideal conditions for growing one of the finest olive oils in the world. Olive oil and table olives are some of the main agricultural products of this region, which accounts for 40 percent of Italy's output of olive oil. Vegetables thrive in the region's rich fertile soil, and this land produces the elusive lampascioni wild onion. Desserts include gelato caldo (ice cream, candied and dried fruit inserted between two slices of genoise cake and quickly passed in a hot oven) and carteddate (sweets made with a flaky pastry dough flavored with honey and cinnamon).

Basilicata

Some of the most impressive scenery in the south of Italy is hidden away in the heart of the tranquil, sun-drenched Basilicata region. Peperoncino, the fiery chili pepper, can be found in all sorts of shapes and sizes at the local market. Traditionally used for flavoring peasant dishes, the Senise pepper is a specialty of the Basilicata region. Another local speciality are dried

“peperoni cruschi” (crispy peppers), used to flavour pasta or accompany “baccalà” (dried salted cod). Some typical dishes of the Basilicata region are lamb cooked in a pignata, or earthenware pot, and flavored with bread crumbs, carrots, cheese and sausage, or al cuturillo, cooked with chicory. “Soppresate” (dried sausage made with finely chopped pork) and “pezzenta” (made from pork trimmings) are accompanied by a variety of cheeses, such as Podalico caciocavallo and pecorino. In terms of wine, the local varieties are second to none; choose from the Aglianico del Vulture, present in the area since the 8th century B.C.

Calabria

Calabria has become an increasingly popular tourist destination for Italians and Europeans alike, who enjoy its 400 miles of beautiful sand beaches, wonderful climate and magnificent mountains. Like the land itself, the cuisine of Calabria unites the sea and the mountains. Fresh vegetables, pork, bread, pasta – and in the coastal areas, fish – are the key foods enjoyed by the Calabrese. The cooking is infused with intense flavors and aromas – chili pepper, mint and garlic. Peperoncino is the most important ingredient in the culinary heritage of Calabria, and it’s difficult to find a local specialty here that doesn’t contain chili pepper. Melanzane all parmigiana, or eggplant parmesan, was invented in Calabria, where its climate and soil are ideal for growing eggplants. Pork also features prominently in the region’s cuisine: with a variety of sausages (either plain or spicy), soppresata (lean pressed pork heavily seasoned with salt and pepper), capicollo and pancetta affumicata (smoked pork belly). All this fine spicy food is served with excellent extra virgin olive oils and rinsed down with special wines such as red or rosé Cirò, Pollino and Savuto. Calabria is also renowned for its figs. To enjoy them all year long, the Calabrese use them to make delicious jams, fig balls, cookies and crocette (dried figs stuffed with almonds). Other regional specialties include the deliciously sweet Tropea onion, liquorice, citrus fruit and bergamot oranges, which thrive only in Calabria.

Sicilia

Golden coastlines, wheat fields, fruit orchards, lush forests, vineyards and brilliant wildflowers describes the variety Sicily offers. The cuisine is just as varied, ranging from Arab-inspired vegetable couscous and roast lamb made with herbs and spices to various seafood dishes that take advantage of the fresh Mediterranean fish. Caponata, a traditional antipasto made of eggplant, tomatoes, celery, olives and capers, is a regional favorite. Caciocavallo Ragusano is a traditional Sicilian cheese made from cow’s milk. Dessert-wise, the place of honor goes to the cassata, made of a tantalizing mixture of sponge cake, chocolate, sweetened ricotta, candied fruit and nuts, decorated with thick icing or marzipan and covered with brightly colored candied fruits. Of course, there’s the ever-popular cannoli, fried pastry rolls with a delicious filling made from sweet ricotta, chocolate and candied fruits, and no festival in Sicily would be complete without torrone, the mouth-watering honey-and-nuts nougat that is made in a wide range of varieties across the island.

Sardegna

This beautiful island is still rather untouched by tourism. Much of Sardegna’s traditional culinary specialties are based on country cooking, although its magnificent seafood is a close second. Suckling pig and wild boar roasted on the spit; rustic stews with wild vegetables and hearty beans; light, dry breads; sheep’s and cow’s cheeses; and fresh herbs such as myrtle and mint have been the traditional elements of Sardinian cuisine for a thousand years. Bottarga (mullet roe), also known as Sardinian caviar, is considered one of the most authentic, delicious examples of the island’s gastronomic tradition. The quintessential pasta of Sardegna is malloreddus, a small gnocchi made from durum wheat semolina, salt and water, and given its distinctive yellow color by the addition of saffron. Malloreddus are traditionally served with a simple tomato sauce, a hearty lamb or sausage ragu or with butter and grated pecorino cheese. Pabassinas, pastries topped with a paste of raisins and walnuts and Gennargentu nougat, are the most requested desserts.

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