



ITALY

Modern Italy has only been a unified country since 1870. It is a country of many regions, each unique in their histories, cultures, and flavors. Yet the food is always recognizably Italian.

TRADITIONAL INGREDIENTS

OLIVE OIL

GARLIC

PASTA

CURED PORK

ONION

HOT RED PEPPER

BEANS

GREENS

SPINACH

ARTICHOKES

SQUASH

TOMATOES

The boot-shaped peninsula, with its long and rugged Mediterranean coastline, has the highest mountains in Europe at its northern end, flanked by the fertile Po Valley to the south, with more mountains running down the center. Its various cuisines have been informed by Greeks and Etruscans, Romans and Arabs, French and Germans, and by the countries it borders. Italy has experienced great wealth in its powerful kingdoms, as well as tremendous poverty. Some of its dishes have roots in the laws of the Roman Catholic Church, others in Celtic rituals. But diverse as it is, wherever you are in Italy, the food is undeniably "Italian." A reverence for quality foods, pasta, fresh ingredients, and for eating itself can be seen everywhere, from the top down to the tip of the boot and the island of Sicily.

A taste of history

All of the countries of Europe eventually adopted New World foods that arrived from Mexico and South America in the 16th century. It may have taken the Italians about 100 years longer than the Spanish to accept the tomato, but when they did, nothing could stop them. Corn found a special place in Italian cuisine in the form of polenta, the corn mash that is much beloved in the north of Italy. Fish, too, is important throughout Italy.

Poverty has shaped Italian cuisine, as it has that of so many other Mediterranean countries. Up until the beginning of the 20th century, peasants did not own their land and suffered famines regularly, brought on by agricultural disasters, population pressures, war, and plague. But Italians have been ingenious in their creation of a *cocina povera*, a "poor cuisine," which draws on humble, seasonal ingredients to evoke full and memorable flavors and lasting satisfaction.

Food through the day

Breakfast in Italy, often taken at bars and cafés, is light: a brioche or *cornetto* (croissant) and a cappuccino or *caffelatte*. *Caffe* (espresso) is usually saved for after mid-morning.

The midday meal is served between noon and 2.30 pm, and is generally earlier in the north than in the south. This was traditionally the main meal in Italy, eaten at home. However, as Italy has grown more prosperous, work days in cities have grown longer, and the lunch break seems to have shrunk proportionately. Now most Italians eat near the office, perhaps having a light meal of pasta or soup and fruit. Dinner has increasingly become the important meal of the day. When Italians eat a light dinner, particularly in the south, it is often a pizza, accompanied by a beer.



The north

One can make a few broad generalizations about the cuisines of Italy, as the food north of Rome tends to differ from that in the southern regions. Butter is preferred as a cooking fat in the north, whereas olive oil and salt pork are used in the south. While flat pastas are the northern preference, tubular pastas are characteristic of the south. You are more likely to find polenta and rice in the north. However, these distinctions only go so far and merely hint at the rich diversity of Italy's gastronomic regions.

Liguria

The northernmost region on the Mediterranean is Liguria and, with its breathtaking rocky coastline and the important port of Genoa, it was traditionally a country of seafarers. Consequently, some of its traditional foods are preserved foods, which could be taken on long voyages, such as dried ravioli, wind-dried cod, preserved anchovies and sardines, and dried beans, in particular, broad beans. Garlic is an important element in Ligurian cuisine, and so are vegetables, fruit, and Mediterranean herbs like thyme, marjoram, and, especially, basil. Pesto, the paste made by crushing fresh basil, garlic, and olive oil, has its origins here, which is why it's known as *pesto alla genovese*. Liguria is a region of fishing villages, and fish is an important element in the diet. But it has never been as plentiful in this part of the Mediterranean as it has in the southern and western parts. As in southern Italy, meat in this poor region is used in small amounts. Scarcity of food, in part a result of Liguria's rocky soil and difficult terrain, has bred ingenuity and great, robust flavors.

Piedmont

An agricultural region producing great wines, wheat, corn, rice, and rye, Piedmont's pastures produce beef and veal, and game is popular in the Alpine areas. One of Italy's most renowned delicacies, white truffles, are a fall specialty of the provinces of Alba and Asti. Filberts, walnuts, and chestnuts are used extensively, and there is a



strong coffee tradition, particularly in Turin and Alba. Turin has beautiful, ornate cafés, where people go to drink wonderful coffee and eat homemade ice cream and rich pastries. The pastries are a vestige of the French culinary traditions developed by cooks at the court of the Dukes of Savoy.

The House of Savoy ruled Piedmont from the 15th to the 19th centuries, leaving a legacy of elegance and elaborate style, which is also evident in the region's buttery risottos with saffron, mushrooms, and cheese, in rich truffle pastas, and in the polished service of some of Turin's restaurants. But more of the food of Piedmont comes from its strong agricultural, peasant tradition. Meat is plentiful here: *bollito misto*, a boiled meat dinner, which can include up to seven meats, is a popular main course, as are rich Alpine cheeses and filling soups.

Tomato harvest

Grown for a strong flavor, tomatoes in Italy are allowed to ripen on the vine before processing or sale. No country has put the tomato to such profound use in cooking.

Mardi Gras (opposite)

The extravagant carnival celebrations of Venice signal the arrival of Lent, when good Roman Catholics traditionally give up meat.

Valle d'Aosta

Tucked into the north of Piedmont, this Alpine region was once part of the House of Savoy, and it remains a bilingual country of French and Italian speakers. Once the royal hunting grounds for the court, the cuisine of this region is a simple one, which relies on the products of its pastoral mountainsides—wild mushrooms, game, beef, blueberries, raspberries, chestnuts, apples, pears, honey, milk, butter, and cheese. One of Italy's most beloved cheeses, Fontina, is produced here.

There is a tradition in Valle d'Aosta called *la grolla*, in which a hand-carved wooden vessel with several spouts, filled with alcoholic coffee made with grappa and sugar, is passed around for people to share. *La grolla* is also called *la coppa di amicizia*, the "cup of friendship," and is a custom that has become quite popular with skiers.

Trentino-Alto Adige

The food of this Alpine region has more Teutonic flavors, understandable because these Tyrolean lands were part of Austria until the end of the First World War. Dumplings, called *canederli*, are much loved, and in the Trentino, apples are used in everything from appetizers to desserts. The food of the Alto Adige, in particular, is really Germanic cooking with Italianate influences. There is a great baking tradition, with dense, dark breads and pastries that use poppy seeds and cinnamon; and the Alpine dairy cows provide lots of butter, milk, cream, and cheese.

Lombardy and Veneto

These are Italy's highest-yielding agricultural areas. Lombardy, home of the wealthy city of Milan and the Italian lake district, is known as "the Italian white belt," because of its love of rice, butter, cheese, and cream. This is the home of the classic risotto. This district of lakes produces superb lemons and olive oil. The northern, Alpine province of Lombardy, called the Valtellina, produces the popular *bresaola*, air-dried fillet of beef, which is usually served in paper-thin slices, with chopped greens and slivers of *parmigiano reggiano* (Parmesan cheese).

In Veneto, you can find food from the sea, the plains, the Alps, and the foothills. Polenta is the staple of choice, with rice and pasta following close behind. Venice is situated here and was a leading commercial city during the Italian Renaissance. It was also the center of the spice trade with the Middle East and Asia. Vestiges of its past can be tasted in one of Venice's most beloved fish dishes, *pesce in saor* (also called *sfogin saor*). This is sweet and sour fish, usually sole, with raisins and pine nuts, which is traditionally eaten at the Festa del Redentore (the Feast of the Redeemer) on July 19, and at the *sagra* of Santa Marta at the end of July—a festival celebrating nature's fertility. Eastern influences are evident in Venetian desserts like *torta alla turchesca*, a tart containing rice cooked in milk, with butter, sugar, raisins, almonds, pine nuts, and eggs. Venice also has a strong pastry tradition. This is where the heavenly dessert, *tiramisu*, made with mascarpone, sponge cake, whipped cream, and semisweet chocolate, has its origins.

Venice and the coastal areas of Veneto enjoy abundant seafood from the Adriatic; fish and shellfish are used in *antipasti* (appetizers), risottos, and pastas, as well as in main courses.

Floating deliveries (opposite)

A vast system of canals makes transportation by boat the most effective way of ensuring that food gets to Venetian markets, shops, and restaurants.

Fish: a staple food

Only six of Italy's twenty regions are landlocked, and there are lakes in several of these. The result is an abundance of seafood, even in places where the cuisine is meat-oriented.





FOOD

In a country where there are all kinds of religious festivals,

Christmas and Easter

remain the most

important. On

Christmas Eve,

everybody eats fish and

the traditional focal

point of the meal is eel.

Christmas Day lunch

begins with stuffed

pasta in broth,

followed by turkey,

goose, or capon.

Christmas in Italy also

has its sweet breads,

such as panforte from

Tuscany, Roman

pangiallo, and

panettone from Milan.

All these contain spices, nuts, and fruits.

Easter invariably

means lamb. In Sicily,

women often bring

their lambs to church

to be blessed before

proceeding with the

cooking. Spring

vegetables, such as

greens, artichokes, and

asparagus, are a part

of the Easter table.

Eggs, symbolic of new

beginnings, are eaten

in many forms, such as

chocolate Easter eggs

and egg breads.

Because Venice had a sailing tradition, salt cod, which could be carried on long voyages, became important in its cuisine, and it has remained so. Inland, meat takes on greater importance; a wide variety is served, often with soft or fried polenta. Another specialty of the interior of the Veneto are cherries, from the area around Marostica, where there is a cherry festival every spring.

Emilia-Romagna

This is the country's most renowned gastronomic region, and has its richest cuisine. Cheese, butter, cream, and pork are key. Some of Italy's most exquisite products come from Emilia-Romagna: *parmigiano reggiano*, which got its name from the provinces of Parma and Reggio Emilia; *prosciutto di Parma* (Parma ham); *balsamic vinegar*, produced in Modena; and *mortadella*, a sausage originating in Bologna, that combines pork, spices, and, sometimes, pistachio nuts.

Filled pastas are a specialty here. There is an enormous range and most are made with flour and eggs, as opposed to dried pasta, which is

made with semolina and water. Filled pastas from this region are unsurpassed. They can be served simply, in a capon broth, but may also be *alla panna* (in cream sauce), *alla salsiccia* (in a sausage sauce), *al pomodoro* (in a tomato sauce), or with *burro e oro* (a light tomato and butter sauce). Here, different towns will have different names for pastas; in addition to the more well-known tortellini and tortelloni, you can find anolini, cappelletti, cappelacci, and balanzoni.

Tuscany

South of Emilia-Romagna is one of Italy's most beautiful and well-liked regions. Tuscany produces some of the world's greatest olive oils, but it is also known for its meats, particularly local Chianina beef, which Italians say is unsurpassed in flavor. Other meats common to the region are pork, wild boar, rabbit, lamb, sausage, offal, prosciutto, and salami.

Spinach is also associated with Tuscany. The French description *à la florentine* applies to dishes that contain the vegetable, because the Florentine Catherine de Medici loved spinach and took her tastes with her when she went to France. Tuscans still grow abundant and excellent spinach today, and are well known for it, as well as for dried beans, olives, and for their unsalted bread. Leftover bread is used for crostini, salads, and thick tomato soups.

There is a strong Jewish tradition in Tuscany, particularly around Livorno. Here you can find sweet pastries such as *Monte Sinai*, made with almonds and rose preserve, and the sweet bread, *il bollo*, probably brought to Italy by the Sephardic Jews. This group had originally lived in Spain during the Moorish occupation. They left at the time of the Inquisition, and found refuge in Italy. Many of the cooking styles they brought with them had Arab inflections, and these are still evident in several dishes, such as *triglie all'ebraica*, a fish dish traditionally served on the night of Yom Kippur, in which red mullet is cooked with salt, sugar, red-wine vinegar, olive oil, raisins, and pine nuts. Other Jewish gastronomic legacies include salt-cod dishes and sausages and prosciutto made from goose.

SIGNATURE DISHES

Ragu The popular meat sauce for pasta.

Frittata A flat omelet, which can be plain or filled with herbs or vegetables. In Liguria it is often filled with fish.

Gnocchi Potato dumplings, served with pesto in Liguria or butter and cheese in the north.

Bolito misto A northern dish of assorted boiled meats, served with mostarda (pickled fruits) and other sauces.

Cotoletta alla Milanese A breaded veal cutlet fried in butter, typical of Lombardia.

Pollo alla cacciatora Chicken cooked in olive oil with rosemary, garlic, and tomatoes.

Cannoli Sicilian fried pastry cylinders filled with ricotta and chocolate, or candied fruits.

Tiramisu A dessert made with mascarpone, chocolate and espresso.

Umbria and Marche

A landlocked region that borders Tuscany to the east, Umbria is famous for its pork, and for its pork butchers, called *norcinos* because they originally came from the town of Norcia. A mountainous, forested region, it yields up many black truffles and these are important in the regional cuisine. Italy's *perugina* chocolate comes from the local town of Perugia, and lentils from Castelluccio are prized.

To the east of Umbria lies a little-known region called Marche, which has a long Adriatic coastline, lush, green hills, and mountains. This combination of landscapes results in a cuisine that is rich in seafood, as well as cheeses, truffles, mushrooms, olives, grapes, and meats. One of Italy's most famous wines, *Verdicchio*, a light, white wine, comes from Marche.

Lazio

Rome lies in the middle of this region and is also at the center of its cuisine. It is a way of cooking in which much of the fat derives from pork, and the vegetables and, especially, the fruit are outstanding. There is a lustiness to the food here, and pleasure and sensuality are almost palpable. Such a style may have evolved as a reaction against the strong, and otherwise restrictive, presence of the Roman Catholic Church, but it is also inherent in the Church itself.

There is a significant Jewish community in Rome dating back to Roman times. Many dishes based on artichokes, eggplant and fennel began with the Italian Jews. One distinctly Roman dish is *carciofi alla giudea* ("artichokes cooked the Jewish way"). For this dish, artichokes, with their chokes removed, are fried in very hot oil so that they open like a flower. Vegetable dishes, such as risotto with artichokes or asparagus, are common at the Jewish Seder meal, as is the Sephardic dish called *scacchi*—a lasagne in which the unleavened bread, *matzo*, replaces pasta.

Outside of Rome, the cuisine of Lazio is a pastoral one, and lamb is all-important. Pasta dishes are simple and often flavored with the local *pecorino romano*, an aged, sheep milk cheese. Eels from the Lago di Bolsena are eaten

with—and often cooked in—a popular wine called Est!Est!!Est!!! The food of this region tends to be salty, a legacy of ancient times, when salt was a symbol of wealth. The Romans brought their salt from the Adriatic along the Via Salaria, the "salt road," which remains an important road between Rome and the Adriatic.

Thin-crust pizza

Traditional Italian pizzas are made with a large, but thin, base and a light topping, and are cooked in wood-fired brick ovens.



The south

The cuisines of the southern regions are simpler than many of the richer, more elaborate northern ones. Originating in poor, dry, mountainous regions, dishes here are geared to drawing lots of flavor out of very little; there is an abundance of garlic-rich, tomato-based preparations here. While the demarcation line in Italy between the land of butter and the land of olive oil and shortening is fluid, it seems to be pretty solid when it comes to *peperoncino*, the spicy, dried, hot red chile pepper that seasons many dishes south of Rome.

Historically, the peasants of southern Italy were the poorest in Europe, disenfranchized people who had to draw what they could from

■ SPIRITS: THE AFTER-DINNER DRINK

AN EVENING IN ITALY MIGHT END WITH A SMALL DRINK, SUCH AS GRAPPA, A SPIRIT MADE FROM DISTILLED GRAPE SKINS AND PIPS. IN LAZIO, THE ANISEED LIQUEUR *SAMBUCA*, IS WELL LIKED. IT MAY BE SERVED *CON LA MOSCA* ("WITH THE FLY"), MEANING THAT IT CONTAINS A COFFEE BEAN—THE DRINK IS SET ALIGHT TO RELEASE THE FLAVOR. *AMARETTO* IS AN ALMOND-FLAVORED LIQUEUR, SUPPOSEDLY CREATED IN HONOR OF AN ARTIST, BERNARDINO LUINI, BY ONE OF HIS MODELS.

lands that belonged to Church or nobility. By the end of the 19th century, millions of southern Italians began to emigrate, their only hope of salvation from poverty. Of the 5 million Italians who went to America in the 19th and early 20th centuries, 4 million came from the south.

Because the southern part of Italy is mountainous, villages were isolated from each other until quite recently. Traditions were strong, passed on from one generation to the next, and so were religious beliefs and superstitions. Perhaps this is why there is still a strong festival tradition in southern Italy. Even if the region is not as poor today as it once was, the collective memory of the wolf at the door is vivid, and the pleasure of shutting him out during gastronomic celebrations is palpable.



Abruzzo and Molise

East of Lazio, Abruzzo is a region with a mountainous interior. Long after Christianity took hold in Italy, cut-off areas such as this clung to their pagan rituals. When Christianity did penetrate, in the 8th and 9th centuries, the cultures blended. Luxurious pagan feasts were subsequently used to celebrate Christian festivals, and Abruzzo is known for one of these, called the *panarda*, which occurs during some festivals and wedding celebrations. The *panarda* is a meal that can last days, or at least hours, with as many as 30 courses. The first part of the meal is *magro*, with no meat served, usually the first night of the celebration. Many fish and vegetable courses are served with rosé wine. After midnight, the dishes are *grasso* ("fat") and include various boiled



meats, sausages, soups, pastas, offal, and *salumi* (sliced meats). Last, roast kid is served, then cheeses, sweet desserts, and coffee.

Abruzzo's small mountain town of Villa Santa Maria, known as "the village of cooks," has spawned many of Italy's—and, indeed, even the world's—great chefs. The tradition of cooking goes back 400 years here, to a time when the Neapolitan nobility would come to the area to hunt. They were very impressed with the way the young men from the town cooked the game the nobles procured, so they brought them back to serve the baronial families in Naples. Cooks today still go to Villa Santa Maria to train at its culinary institute. So highly regarded are some of the chefs who have come out of this village that during the Second World War, the German order

BARS: A PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The habit of popping into a bar for a coffee and a snack while standing at the counter is well suited to the busy lifestyles of city-dwelling Italians. Some bars will be part of a restaurant, others will be places where people can buy stamps, bus tickets, tobacco, and newspapers. All bars, however, will have a coffee machine.

Coffee is an Italian specialty and people drink it throughout the day. At breakfast, an Italian might drink: a *caffellatte*, which is half espresso and half milk; a *cappuccino*, which has more milk foam; or a *macchiato*, which has a tiny spot of milk foam. Later in the morning, an Italian might have a *caffè*, a simple espresso. For coffee with a slight twist, there is *caffè corretto*, which is espresso with a small amount of brandy or grappa. On hot days, the iced *caffellatte freddo* is refreshing.

went out to spare Villa Santa Maria, because Field Marshal Kesselring had eaten meals prepared by Abruzzan chefs at the Hotel Excelsior in Rome. Every October the town has a two-day festival to honor its culinary traditions, for which the entire main street is transformed into a buffet.

The cuisine of the uplands of Abruzzo and its neighboring region Molise has been shaped by a cultural phenomenon called *la transumanza*, which has lasted for centuries. This is an annual migration of shepherds with their flocks from the uplands to the lowlands and the sea. Dishes spawned by this tradition are simple and quickly prepared; they draw upon a range of vegetables and greens that can be gathered from the fields.

Campania

Much of the Italian emigration of the 19th century was from Campania, the home of Naples and Amalfi, and the Italian gastronomic ideal outside of Italy has its origins here: tomatoes, spaghetti, mozzarella, pastries, coffee, and, above all, pizza are at their best in Campania.

PASTA: IN MANY FORMS

Recent research suggests that pasta came to Italy from North Africa before the 13th century. It is now "the" Italian ingredient. Reflecting the variety of cuisines, pastas appear in different guises from region to region. In the Alps, filled pastas include Germanic ingredients such as sauerkraut and beet. Sicily's *pasta con le sarde* (with sardines) exhibits Arab influences, containing saffron, pine nuts, and currants. And in rural Lazio, pastas are simple, originally so that they could be made by shepherds in the fields—*pasta alla gricia* includes pancetta (salt-cured bacon), pepper, and pecorino cheese.



Although it is eaten all over Italy, pizza is still more of a southern dish. The most common varieties eaten here are *pizza margherita*, with a simple tomato, olive oil, and mozzarella topping, and *pizza marinara*, which is topped with a tomato sauce flavored with garlic and oregano, but no cheese. A traditional Neapolitan Christmas Eve pizza is *pizza alla scarola*, topped with *escarole* (a type of endive), sultanas, black olive, pine nuts, and capers.

Campania has an elaborate gastronomic tradition, which dates first from antiquity, then from the Spanish Bourbon court cuisine. Bourbon cuisine was heavily influenced by the court of Versailles, as King Ferdinand's queen, Maria Carolina, was the sister of Marie Antoinette. Cooks from France came to preside over the kitchens of the Neapolitan and Sicilian nobility after the French Revolution. They were called *monzu*, a word derived from the French "monsieur." Dishes that have been inherited from this time include *sformato Ferdinando*, a stew with meatballs, chicken livers, and black truffles; *timballo di maccheroni*, an elaborate pasta mold; *crepelle* (pancakes); and a layered rice cake, called *sartu di riso*. Many pastries also came out of these noble kitchens, desserts like *baba*, *sfogliatelle* (puff pastry filled with ricotta and candied fruit), and *zuppa inglese* (trifle). The city of Amalfi reflects a Moorish influence, particularly in its love of lemons and nut-filled pastries. The Arabs brought iced drinks to Italy, and the Italians perfected the art of making *granita* (icy sorbet) and *gelato* (ice cream).

Puglia

The heel of Italy's "boot" consists of the region of Puglia. This area is very hot, and whereas the rest of the south is mountainous, most of Puglia is flat and fertile and produces abundant fruits, vegetables, and wheat. There is a meat and cheese-eating tradition in Foggia, in Puglia's interior, thought to have derived from the shepherds who came from Arcadia in Greece 2400 years ago. Elsewhere in Puglia, fish and seafood are widely appreciated. In the southern part of Puglia, onions replace garlic as a

Reading the

MENU

THOUGH THE INDIVIDUAL ITEMS ON A MENU DEPEND ON WHERE YOU ARE IN ITALY, MOST MENUS HAVE A SIMILAR STRUCTURE.

antipasti

Literally "before the pasta," antipasti form the first course of a meal. They consist of small dishes, such as salads, broiled vegetables, or cured meats. In

Emilia-Romagna, you will be able to choose prosciutto from Parma or mortadella from Bologna.

In northern parts of Trentino, speck and carne salata (cold meats) will be available. In the south, antipasti may be replaced by minestre (soup).

primi (first course)

While most people outside of Italy see pasta as a main dish, it is customarily the basis of the primi, which is eaten before the meat or fish course. In northern Italy, you could choose a risotto or a polenta dish as an alternative.

secondi (main dishes)

A course based on one of the vast array of meat or fish selections available in Italy. Sometimes it will be served with contorni (vegetables and salads), though the side dish may follow. You might try vegetables drizzled with lemon or olive oil, or something more elaborate, such as carciofi alla Romana (artichokes stuffed with mint and garlic).

formaggi (cheese)

This course precedes dessert. It might be based on cheeses from around the country or local makes.

la frutta e i dolci (fruit and desserts)

Fruit is the most common dessert in Italy, but Italians also make wonderful desserts such as tiramisu, cannoli, and, of course, gelato or granita.



Pasticceria

These shops selling elaborate cakes and pastries are a visual delight. Italians might buy *focaccine* (sweet breads) to serve with cream, while *dolci* (little cakes) are eaten with a cup of coffee.

seasoning. Fruit and tomatoes are dried in the sun, the latter sometimes packed in oil or made into a concentrate. The hot, dry climate and flat terrain of Puglia lends itself to large-scale olive production; this is the largest olive oil-producing region in Italy, making a third of Italy's olive oil.

Calabria and Basilicata

The toe of Italy's boot, Calabria, is a spectacular region of mountains and pristine sea, with two coasts which have made it prey to invasions; its previous rulers have included Romans, Goths, Byzantines, Saracens, Spanish, and the Austrians.

Peperoncino is a dominant flavor in the cuisine, and Calabria produces excellent vegetables, particularly sweet red peppers, artichokes, zucchini, eggplant, and onions. Swordfish and shellfish are enjoyed in coastal areas, whereas lamb, kid, pork sausage, dried beans, and cheeses supply the protein inland.

Calabria's neighboring region, Basilicata, is equally poor, even desolate in places. Historically, meat was eaten here only at Christian vacations and weddings, and the meat was chicken or rabbit. Sheep was eaten only when it died of old age. This said, Basilicata's most famous food product is a spicy pork sausage called *lucanica*.

Sicily and Sardinia

Some of Italy's most interesting food comes from Sicily. The cuisine of this island has many influences: Greek, Roman, Arab, Norman, Spanish, and Italian. It is the Arab legacy, however, that gives the cuisine of Sicily its individual character. It began in the 9th century, when Muslim Arabs invaded the island. They ruled here 264 years, before the Christian reconquest, but their culture remained intact for a total of 400 years. The Normans, who ruled Sicily after the Arabs, had a very high regard for Arab culture and frequently used Arab cooks in their households. Sweet-making traditions introduced by the Arabs were continued in convents and monasteries.

The Arabs planted citrus trees, almonds, and sugar cane in Sicily. They introduced rice and couscous to the island. The fish couscous dish, called *cuscusu*, is a uniquely Sicilian dish. Pine nuts, raisins, orange juice, and lemon juice come up time and again in recipes, such as stuffed swordfish rolls, *involtini di pesce spada*. Sweet and sour fish creations, like *triglie con salsa alla menta* (red mullet in mint sauce) and *baccala all'agrodolce* (sweet and sour salt cod) have distinct Arab inflections.

Sicilian confectionary is renowned. The Arabs brought sherbet-making and sweet-making skills to Sicily, and this tradition lived on long after they left. *Cassata alla siciliana*, the local Easter cake, is one of the most well-known Sicilian desserts. It gets its name from the Arabic *qas'at*, the name of the pan in which it is baked. The cake was clearly influenced also by the later presence in Sicily of the Spanish Bourbon court, as it is made with a sponge cake, called *pan di Spagna*, filled with copious amounts of sweetened ricotta cheese, flavored with cinnamon, candied fruit, and semisweet chocolate, and elaborately decorated with confectioner's sugar or marzipan. Another famous Sicilian dessert with an Arab heritage is *cannoli*, deep-fried pastry tubes filled with ricotta, sugar, candied fruits, chocolate bits, and orange peel. *Seppole di San Giuseppe*, eaten throughout Italy at the festival of St Joseph of Enna, are sweet pastries made of fried dough. They are called

zeppoli in the rest of southern Italy, and the word comes from the Arabic *zalabiyah*, which means "fried soft dough."

As in the Kingdom of Naples, the Bourbon noble families brought in the professional French chefs, called *monzu*. These chefs brought butter to Sicily as well as a refined culinary tradition, which remains in the great banquets held at wealthy households, featuring dishes such as buttered chicken liver mousse, game pâtés covered in aspic jelly, delicate pasta *timbales* filled with meat, and cheese brioches.

Sicilian cuisine has a strong seafood tradition. Fish are plentiful in the waters around Sicily—tuna and swordfish are the most prized. Near Trapani there is an age-old tradition, known as *la mattanza*, in which fishermen in small boats encircle schools of tuna and capture as many as they can. Tuna, swordfish, and other Mediterranean fish show up on all restaurant menus, in pasta sauces, rolled and broiled, in various sauces, and in soups. However, during the first 40 days of the year, fishing is banned so that the fish can replenish their stocks.

In contrast to Sicily, the nearby island of Sardinia has a pastoral culinary tradition. Bread, lamb, cheese, and vegetables are eaten more than fish, due to the fact that many Sardinians traditionally lived inland to avoid the threat of malaria and of pirates on the coasts. Now that Sardinia has a well-developed tourist industry, there are many fish restaurants on the coast, but most of their cooks are from other parts of Italy.

Sardinians produce excellent soft ricotta and pecorino cheese from their many sheep, as well as long-lasting flat breads called *carta de musica*. In the 14th century, the Catalans occupied Alghero, leaving their mark on both the cuisine and the language. Catalan is still spoken here, and the area's culinary heritage includes the use of saffron in dishes, meat pies called *empanadas*, and a mixed meat stew called *lepudrida*. There is also a Moorish legacy in Sardinia as reflected in its sweet almond pastries.

The delicatessen (opposite)

Found in most Italian towns, these food stores sell a range of fine foods, such as specialty cheeses, wines, cured meats, sausages, and balsamic vinegar.