

ROMA



FOOD

TRAIL





FOOD OF THE WORKING CLASSES

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“pilgrims”,
the

travellers, who
once arrived in

Any tourist arriving in Rome for the first time finds himself in a complex, chaotic city that is still wrapped up in its more than two-thousand year old history. As he sets out to explore, he will discover not only many of the Eternal City’s beautiful sites – monuments, churches, world-famous archaeological areas and more besides – he is also bound to come across some of the many speciality foods enjoyed for centuries by visiting

Rome in their thousands in search of ancient relics or simply to confirm their faith. Rome, not only the city of great emperors and popes, but also of the working-class people described by Belli (writer & poet: 1791-1863), Goethe’s city of the soul and of course the protagonist in many Fellini films, is now a vast metropolis that has learned to live with all its contradictions and its heritage. But, anyone

wanting to get to the city's "real" soul need only sample some typical Roman dishes to realise that they reflect its history - genuine and simple, made of a few basic ingredients, often those that are cheap to obtain. If you venture into the lanes and backstreets around the **Pantheon**, you're assured an unique experience of aromas, colours, flavours and colours, a veritable journey through a rustic cuisine full of intense flavours; the food of the "real Romans" who have always lived in these old city streets and squares, the food that has always animated the city's many inns and eateries, and the type of food that never graced the tables of Rome's powerful aristocracy. It was made of humble ingredients, often those destined for



the bin and certainly not worthy of princes and cardinals. Our "food trails" wind their way through working-class neighbourhoods where this traditional food continues to thrive. Districts like **Trastevere** and **Testaccio** that are fairly central, but also those slightly further out like **Garbatella**, **San Lorenzo** and **Ostiense** where trattorias abound. In the evening, they are the districts most popular with locals

thanks to the historic inns and hostleries that rarely give in to the fashion of re-inventing traditional dishes and that envelop guests in an atmosphere in which aromas emanating from the kitchen merge with the images evoked of a past in which charcoal burners, artisans and the like spent their lives fighting to survive - within spitting distance of some of Rome's finer dwellings and palaces. This then is Rome - a pot pourri of refined nobility and unsophisticated hardworking people used to making do and somehow remaining true to themselves whilst surrounded by the power that resonated in the city deemed to be the capital of the world for centuries. Lucky for us, their culinary traditions have passed from one generation to the next.



It's not by chance that the place of honour, amongst genuine, traditional Roman dishes, goes to what is known as "**the fifth quarter**" (of a butchered animal) or in other words, **the offal** (*frattaglie*) - the innards and least expensive parts of beef and lamb / mutton - that would never be selected by anyone even slightly well off and were therefore usually just thrown away. We're talking about **tripe, kidneys, heart, livers, spleen, sweetbreads, spinal cord, brains, tongue, lights (lungs) and tail. Coratella** (pluck) - the **liver heart and tongue** of a cow cooked up together is also popular.



with a slice of ham and sage) are just some of the delights of a plethora of working-class dishes.

Two age-old local dishes still found in Roman eateries both use cheap cuts of beef: **the spleen**, gently stewed with sage, garlic, vinegar, anchovies and pepper, and kidneys cooked with tomatoes, onion, parsley, white wine and pepper. Although it rarely appears on menus, and is not offal-based, **“garofolato”** is a roast eye round of beef (*girello*), stuffed with bits of lard, cloves (*chiodo di garofano* in Italian, hence the name) and sliced garlic, pan cooked slowly for a couple of hours with some celery and tomatoes. This same sauce is also used, poured over **tripe cooked “Trastevere style”**,

The combination of these lowly ingredients result in extraordinary dishes that are flavoursome yet delicate, and that despite their humble beginnings, caress the palate. **Rigatoni** (pasta tubes) **with “pajata”** (small intestine of an unweaned calf) or **kidneys, pluck with artichokes or onions, Roman-style tripe** (tomato based), **oxtail and other stews**, not forgetting **saltimbocca** (“leap-in-the mouth” - because it’s so tasty - veal escalope cooked

which is finished off in the oven with a sprinkling of grated pecorino cheese and some chopped mint.

WHERE IN ROME? Although these dishes appear on menus all over Rome, from the centre to the furthest suburbs, their true “home” is, and always has been **Testaccio**, today one of the city’s trendiest districts. Its working class origins are practically unchanged, and people still remember how, years ago, butchers working in the slaughter house were paid in mixture of cash and meat - specifically the fifth quarter. Snails are last, but by no means least in this short list of speciality dishes. An essential part of French haute cuisine, here in Rome they are very much a home-

cooked dish, but no less tasty for that! **Snails “Roman style”**, also known locally as **“San Giovanni”** (St. John’s) style, were and are traditionally cooked in Roman eateries on the night between the 23rd and 24th of June – in honour of the saint – and served up during a sort of street party, still held today in the square in front of the Basilica. The ancient festa held on 24 June was, instead, dedicated to the Goddess Ceres, hoping to invoke fortune and wealth and to chase away hostile divinities. When it was later dedicated to St. John, it maintained its propitiatory function, and the “horns” of the snails represented the devil – evil. In the 19th century, it also became a festa dedicated to peace and the various stalls set up in the area – serving



snails of course - became known as the stalls of peace or concord.

ANONYMOUS

18TH CENTURY RECIPE:

Feed your snails with mint for at least one whole day, before soaking them in plenty of slightly salty water. Next, rinse well under running water until no more scum remains. Take the snails out of their shells and boil them for a few minutes in water to which you have added 2 or 3 spoonfuls of vinegar. Prepare a tomato sauce with some chopped garlic, anchovies, chilli pepper and a bunch of mint. Pour it over the snails and continue cooking for at least an hour.

When it comes to frugal but still mouth-watering food, the traditional food

of Rome's working class often featured in the works of artists, poets and writers, particularly during the 19th century, who aimed to depict the reality of where they were living. It's how we know that **soup and pasta dishes** abounded and, just like everything else in Rome – had distant origins.

Polenta-like dishes made of spelt flour, as well as broad beans, barley and "pultes" (a kind of porridge) were the soups of ancient

times. As far back as the 1st century BC, writers Cicero and Horace could not get enough of "Laganum", thin sheets of pasta made of flour and water, and still today you will find outstanding **soups made from vegetables** and/or pulses. **Stracciatella** and **brodetto di Pasqua** are both enriched by beaten egg, (the latter with an even richer broth).

Cappelletti (stuffed hat-shaped pasta) in broth are served at home on special occasions, and in most popular eateries as an option to all the other pasta dishes known all over the world, although few, elsewhere, can truly reproduce them. What lies behind the success of Roman cuisine is **the use of local ingredients and flavourings which include wonderful vegetables like broccoli, chicory, artichokes, tomatoes and broad beans, an amazing array**

of simple but tasty dairy products and tender, flavoursome meat, mostly all from the Roman countryside which, with its rich, fertile soil has always managed to supply the city with all that it needs.

Guanciale (cured pork cheek) pancetta, (bacon), vegetables and pulses give us dishes that have become legendary like **"pasta and fagioli" (& beans) with pork fat/skin (cotiche), pasta with broccoli, spaghetti alla carbonara** (originally made by charcoal makes because the few basic ingredients egg and bacon, were easy to take to work), **bucatini all'amatriciana** (traditional sauce from Amatrice in the hills behind Rieti, made with guanciale, tomatoes, lard, chilli peppers and pecorino cheese – no onions or garlic!), or la



“gricia”, an older version of l’amatriciana without tomatoes. There’s also **fettuccine alla romana** (meat sauce enriched with onions, chicken livers and breast, mushrooms & tomatoes) or **alla papalina** (made especially for Pope Pius XII – like a carbonara but with added cured ham and onions), not forgetting **ravioli stuffed with ricotta** either – all usually served with a sprinkling of **pecorino romano** – Roman sheep’s cheese. **Penne all’arrabiata** (angry) is yet another favourite

dish, although this time the tomato sauce is really hot and fiery (hence the name) thanks to the addition of lots and lots of chilli pepper! The list of **spaghetti** dishes is as long as your arm, but to pick out a few: **alla carrettiera** (cart-driver: tomatoes, tuna belly, mushrooms, garlic & chilli pepper), **alla puttanesca** (prostitute – tomatoes, olive, capers & garlic), **alla checca** (short for Francesca- chopped raw tomatoes, mozzarella

and caciotta cheese), **alla bersagliera** (soldiers who march on the run, therefore quick to make: tomatoes, garlic, oil, chilli peppers, salami and provolone cheese). We could go on forever but we’re too hungry!

WHERE IN ROME?

Roman food is a party that just keeps on going, day after day all over the city, but, tucking into to some “gricia” or “carbonara” in **Trastevere**, or **Borgo** – in the shadow of St. Peter’s dome – or in **Monti**, the city’s oldest district, is in a league all of its own.

Of the whole gamut of Roman food however, it is **Roman-Jewish food** that gets the laurels. One of the earliest fusion cuisines, it combines and muddles up the features, cultures and food of these two great peoples. Given that the Jews

arrived in Rome way back in the 2nd century BC, that fusion was inevitable, especially as – to stay in theme – basic Jewish food, like traditional Roman fare, is also features good, simple ingredients which, properly combined, prove that even the poorest ingredients can be transformed into something delicious. In a very equitable exchange, traditional Jewish cuisine brought its influence to bear on typical Roman dishes whilst local food products inspired new “Jewish style” recipes too. The meeting of these two cuisines form the basis of the city’s culinary tradition; in fact it is hard to tell where the one begins and the other ends. If in Rome in the right season, for example, not to try the best artichokes in the world would be a real sin!



semolina, dipped in melted butter and then baked in the oven.

Another **tart – made of sardines and artichokes**, and a **timballe of ricotta** are also popular. We must not forget **fillets of baccalà** (salt-cod) or **courgette flowers** either – stuffed with mozzarella and anchovies, fried in a light batter – or Rome’s **“suppli al telefono”** – fried rice balls stuffed with mozzarella that stretches out just like a telephone wire. Both are early forms of street food still much loved today. There are plenty of soups to try too, the most famous of which is

Artichokes

are undoubtedly the “princes” of Roman cuisine and one of the best ways to try them is **“alla giudia”** (Jewish style), briefly soaked in lemon water then salted and deep fried in olive oil. Absolutely delicious! So too is a **“tortino di alici”** in which a pastry base is layered with anchovies and endives – a typical Roman vegetable – baked and then eaten warm or cold. Next? **“Gnocchi alla Romana”**, made with

made of **broccoli and “arzilla”**, the local name for a delicate white fish, and a **chick pea soup with “pennerelli”** is another must; it dates back to ancient Roman times and the “pennerelli” (little pens) are actually small pieces of meat off cuts; any meat, except of course pork which is forbidden under Jewish dietary laws. The next stop in our food trail continues involves dishes starring lamb – which only Romans call **abbacchio** – that remind us that the earliest Romans were described as a pastoral people with ties to

gods of the woods and those that protected their precious flocks of sheep. Varro, ancient Roman author of the 2nd century BC described how newborn lambs were tied to a post – *ad baculum* (hence *abbacchio*) – for the first four months of their lives to ensure they did not hurt themselves running around. One well-known dish is **fried, breaded lamb chops, cutlets “a scottadito”** meaning burned fingers, which is what happened to the shepherds when they used



their fingers to eat. It had, after all been cooked on a griddle or over very hot charcoal! Oven baked **lamb with potatoes or pan baked with olives or lemon** are other traditional dishes to try. Whilst lamb is traditionally associated with Easter, chicken (pollo) is also part of this great feasting tradition, especially when fried (fritto) or cooked with peppers (con peperoni) in the dish typically eaten on Ferragosto (15 August)

WHERE IN ROME?

Head for the district known as the “Ghetto”, the area Jews were forced to live, in segregation, from 1550-1870, and still the heart of Rome’s Jewish community. It was here in fact, on 16 October 1943 that women, children and the elderly were rounded up,

deported and gobbled up by the Nazi machine. Today, these narrow streets in the shadows of Rome’s largest synagogue, the imposing Portico of Ottavio and the Theatre of Marcellus, are the setting for a more peaceful life, and home to a great many trattorias offering a wide range of dishes representing the best of Roman-Jewish cuisine. What better way to prove that free men can and indeed did overcome those that represent man’s inhumanity to man?

Whether in ancient, medieval or Renaissance Rome, **bread** has always been an important element in the city’s foodscape, omnipresent on the tables of rich and poor alike; **no Roman would ever consider**



sitting down to eat unless there was some bread on the table! There can’t be anyone who has never heard of **bruschetta** – a slice of toasted (bruscato) bread that in its simplest form is rubbed with a piece of garlic, drizzled with oil and sprinkled with a pinch of salt, but is often enriched by the addition of any number of other ingredients such as tomatoes, peppers, cheese or even onions. Truly a peasant dish, bruschetta was

originally a way of using up stale bread, but it has become something we like to snack on at any time or as an hors d’oeuvre. **Pizza bianca** – white pizza – is another Roman speciality, either thin and crunchy, or thicker and “dressed” with oil and sea salt. It is wonderful with some freshly sliced mortadella or – in the summer – filled with figs and – for real foodies – cured ham. Some historic bakers also prepare a simple **pizza rossa** – red pizza – with a thin crust cooked on a baking sheet, drizzled with oil and covered in tomatoes. Nothing could be simpler – and best eaten ambling along the



streets
around Campo di
Marzio.

WHERE IN ROME?

Wherever you go in the city, “historic” wood-burning, modern electric or gas ovens send out wafts of irresistible aromas that tempt you into eating a quick and fragrant snack, although the areas around the Pantheon and the Campo dei Fiori are probably the most inviting as they turn out freshly baked bread and rolls all day long. In the

evenings, however, it is **pizza** that reigns supreme: Margherita – with tomato, mozzarella and basil/oregano, Capriciosa – mozzarella, ham, mushrooms, artichokes and tomato, con Funghi – with mushrooms, or Prosciutto – ham, or actually, anything else we might fancy! From Testaccio to Trastevere, San Lorenzo to Pigneto and Ostiense to Prati – you are truly spoilt for choice!

A poem about bread, written by Aldo Fabrizi in Roman dialect in 1970, entitled “Nonno Pane” (Grandpa bread) extols the versatility of bread, saying that besides bruschetta and panzanella (bread soup) bread goes well with practically every ingredient under the sun, but it is particularly

good if you are hungry!

If, after all that, you are still feeling peckish, try some of the typical Roman **desserts or cakes** sold in most of the city’s pastry shops alongside other famous Italian specialities like **Montblanc** (puréed chestnuts, cocoa & rum) and **profiteroles**. Roman desserts are as simple and genuine as its main courses, prepared at home when there is something special to celebrate, or on important religious holidays.

‘**Maritozzi**’ are perfect for those with a sweet tooth; soft rolls filled with whipped cream and served for breakfast throughout the capital and beyond. The basic dough is often enriched with pine nuts, candied orange peel and



sultanas; the rolls are glazed with a simple syrup as soon as they are out of the oven and only filled moments before eating. Their name reflects the tradition of young men presenting young women with these sweet rolls during the so-called wedding season, proving they were good potential husbands – “mariti”. Today, the choux buns fried and filled with cream – known as “**bignè di San Giuseppe**” are available most of the year, but traditionally



they were only prepared in March, the month dedicated to St. Joseph. **Castagnole “alla Romana”** are traditional carnival treats – fried choux pastry made with rum, sprinkled with icing sugar and cinnamon.

Carnival was one of the main festas in 18th century Rome, celebrated just before Lent, although its origins derive from the ancient Roman religious feast of *Saturnalia* which featured all sorts of public entertainment, orgiastic rites, sacrifices,

dances and the wearing of masks. Celebrations ended with the **Festa dei moccoletti**, during which everyone carried a “mocolo” – a candle – blown out only when all was over. It marked the beginning of Lent, the period for penitence and fasting.

Sour cherry (visciole) tarts are another Roman tradition, no doubt because the Roman countryside is teeming with trees bearing these dark red, slightly acidic cherries that also make amazing jam.

Ricotta made from sheep’s milk is another essential ingredient in Roman cakes and desserts. In one of the simplest, but seriously elegant desserts, *ricotta* is served as is, enhanced only **with some sugar, chocolate shavings, a tot of liqueur and a sprinkling of orange**

zest, but there is a long list of tempting desserts in which it stars: fried or flavoured with practically anything, made into a sort of custard-like dish (*budino*) and “*boconotti*” – biscuits filled with a *ricotta* cream, as well as *ricotta* and sour cherry tarts – the best of which can be found at the Portico d’Ottavia.

One Christmas must is “pangiallo” (yellow bread) full of lime zest, candied orange, pine nuts and almonds, whilst another, called **“panepepato”** (peppery bread) is made of honey, walnuts, almonds pine nuts – and cinnamon to provide the peppery zing. Both “robust” enough to munch on the



move, perhaps during a walk along the banks of the Tiber. The best

Easter cake of all

is **“pizza ricresciuta”** a.k.a. “pizza dolce”, a leavened cake flavoured with cinnamon and aniseed seeds, usually followed by **“mostaccioli”** which in Rome, means hard biscuits containing fried and candied fruit and honey, or better still, a tasty ice-cream – vanilla, mint, chocolate, cream or strawberry. Or, what



about some **“Grattachecca”**? It’s a typical late 19th century Roman creation that became a popular street food, served in kiosks dotted all over the city, although those that became especially famous for it were along the banks of the Tiber. The name, “grattachecca” reflects the way it is made: a huge block of ice – known as a “checca” is grated (grattato) with a special tool and fruit juice or syrup is poured over the shavings. Snow or ice mixed with fruit

actually first appeared during banquets hosted by Roman emperors as a sophisticated distraction and later reappeared during the Renaissance when, thanks to Catherine de’ Medici and the French court, “eating cold things” became all the rage.

WHERE IN ROME?

Portico d’Ottavia, Pantheon, San Giovanni, Prati, Pinciano, Trastevere & Testaccio. Let’s end this gastronomic line up by visiting some **markets**. There are a few streets in every district that come to life every morning when the stalls are set up, but the best place to go to enjoy a stroll amongst an array of vegetables, meats, cold

cuts and cheese is undoubtedly **Campo de’ Fiori**, one of the city’s oldest markets. It’s a place in which the image of Rome and all the legends that the cinema, art and poetry have spread throughout the world can still be found. **In the shadow cast by the statue of Giordano Bruno**, a 16th century philosopher and exponent of free thought, you will find an explosion of colours and aromas. Those selling the vegetables and wines they have produced themselves stand proudly by their stalls that are stacked with broccoli, salad crops and artichokes, pumpkins in a multitude of shapes and sizes, bunches of chilli peppers, bunches of red and white grapes and pomegranates. Stalls selling spices can also still to be found, as can

those specialising in fresh, tasty and fragrant mixed salad leaves, whilst fishermen set out their catch and loudly invite people to buy. **The market in Testaccio** is also deservedly popular. Up until a few years ago it was set up in the district’s main square, but now has a new home in a covered structure next to the old slaughterhouse. It sells everything and anything. A few of the stalls, mentioned enthusiastically in prestigious foreign newspapers, are certainly worth finding if you want to try a roll filled with tripe or various fried items served in a paper cone. Foodies will be in paradise. As to the indisputable king of Roman gastronomy, our **local wine** is served in every traditional trattoria and

historic eatery (fraschetta) in the capital. Red, white, rosé, sparkling and “tantalizing”, it used to be transported from the surrounding countryside and the Castelli district on traditional wine carts. A visit to the **Castelli district** to taste it is certainly worthwhile, perhaps accompanied by

some traditional **“porchetta”**- slices of pork from a whole slow-roasted pig stuffed with aromatic herbs. To complete your gastronomic journey, why not go to **Ostia** to try some **spaghetti with clams (telline)** – at sunset maybe, when the sea beyond Rome’s ancient port turns pink.



FOOD

TRAIL





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