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20 Italian Dishes You Need To Try At Least Once

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BY LUCIA CAPRETTI / FEB. 1, 2022 11:54 AM EST

It's no secret that Italian cuisine consists of some of the tastiest and most popular dishes around. While pizza, pasta, and risotto variations abound outside of Italy, other items found more regionally are less known. Unless you've had the chance to visit the stunning country, with its endless miles of coastline and mountainous terrain, you might be surprised at its wide culinary variety. Nonetheless, each region of Italy holds certain ingredients and recipes firmly to heart, having perfected them over time.

Of course, favorites like pasta and pizza are worth mentioning, with their unique twists dependent on their origin. However, the vast range of dishes means that you'll always have something new to try when you are in the mood for Italian food. Fresh local ingredients are essential, and if you can source a few items from specialty grocery stores, you are well on your way to trying your hand at making some of these dishes. Although many have been prepared for hundreds of years with often guarded recipes, the flavors are undeniably timeless and satisfying. Bring an appetite and read on as we share the ins and outs of 20 Italian dishes you have to try.

1. Pizza Napoletana

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Let's start with a basic dish that might as well be a universal favorite. Although a wide range of world cuisines serve up a flatbread with toppings, pizza has got to be close to the top of the popularity charts. From thin crust to deep dish, the various versions have all evolved from pizza Napoletana, aka Neapolitan pizza. The name comes from Naples, its city of origin, and the pizza actually has a set of international regulations that must be met in order to label it as such.

While other elements of Italian bureaucracy might appear chaotic or confusing, a strict set of guidelines controls the diameter of the pizza, the width of its raised edge, and the simple yet specific dough ingredients. The method and consequent fermentation of the dough must also meet select requirements. Toppings are simple and star buffalo mozzarella, tomatoes, and fresh basil, the classic ingredients of a pizza Margherita. The pizza must be cooked in a wood-fired stove at high heat for just over a minute.

As for the final result — expect pure deliciousness. The dough is supple with a puffed edge, soaking up the flavors. A subtle smokiness from the wood-fired oven sets this pie apart from the rest. You're probably better off consuming it with a fork and knife like the locals, but that's a small effort to make for such a tasty reward.

2. Polenta

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A glance at an unassuming pot of polenta might not evoke enthusiasm, but the dish is quite a chameleon. Its creamy consistency makes an excellent base for stews, and there are plenty of sweet and savory ways to pep it up. Nowadays, the dish is made with ground corn, ranging from a coarse to fine flour, but according to Italy Heritage, a variety of grains were used in the past. The flour is boiled in water, producing a porridge-like mash, which Italy Heritage explains is the source of the name (puls being the Latin word for a type of porridge). Unless you're using instant polenta, the mixture needs to be vigorously stirred during the hour or so that it boils.

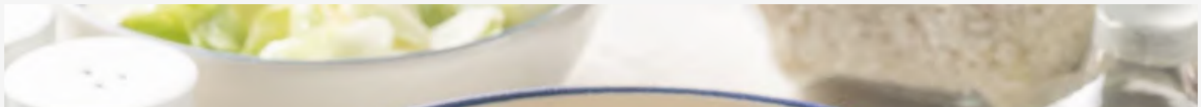
The corn-based dish is especially popular in the northern provinces, where it has long been a staple of the diet. At its most basic, polenta can taste quite plain, but butter, salt, cheese, or sauces are simple ways to enhance it. Throughout history, as La Cucina Italiana notes, the dish has simultaneously been a filling option for the poor as well as the base of many decadent meals for the wealthy. Tomato, vegetable, or meat sauces are common ways to dress up the creamy mash, but it can take on a completely different texture if it is fried or baked. In fact, fried polenta balls with sugar, raisins, and chocolate are a popular snack during Carnival.

3. Ribollita

Praised for its tall cypress trees and endless rolling hills, Tuscany is also the source of many hearty dishes, one of which is ribollita, a filling soup that will become your new favorite comfort meal. The name means to reboil in Italian, which is exactly what used to be done to it day after day in an effort to stretch it into one more meal, according to La Cucina Italiana. Traditionally, the dish was prepared by peasants who collected scraps of bread soaked with meat juices from luxurious feasts. The bread was then added into a seasoned broth with black cabbage and cannellini beans, topped with daily leftovers to serve it as long as possible. Unlike most bread, Tuscan bread is unsalted and is meant to be eaten with salty food, which makes it a subtle accompaniment for the central flavors of a dish (via The Florentine).

While the most basic preparations were made with the few vegetables that could be found locally, present-day renditions include peas, celery, zucchini, and carrots as well as a generous drizzle of olive oil and grated Parmesan at service. Tuscookany indicates that a quintessential hint of black pepper is required for a true ribollita. The source notes that the soup's consistency can vary depending on its components, and it's not uncommon to use a fork to eat it. Even quirkier — traditionally, a few mouthfuls of soup are followed by a bite of onion, the ultimate palate cleanser.

4. Risotto alla Milanese



As far as rice-based dishes go, risotto is certainly a popular option with endless variations, including risotto alla Milanese, so named for its city of origin, Milan. According to Italy Magazine, the north of the country has excellent growing conditions for rice, making it the perfect ingredient for local dishes. What sets risotto alla Milanese apart from the rest is its bright yellow color, courtesy of a few strands of saffron that infuse the dish with heady aromas.

The exact history of this risotto dish has a large gap. It first appears in a legend from the 1500s about an overzealous saffron lover who used the spice in a rice dish served at a wedding, Italy Heritage details. However, the source indicates that the actual recipe was only documented in the 1800s, consisting of rice toasted in butter with onions, slowly cooked in stock. Eventually, wine was added to the dish to balance out the rich flavor with some acidity. Risotto alla Milanese is certainly a popular version of the rice specialty, and it is often served alongside other regional meals. The creamy dish pairs wonderfully with osso buco or Milanese cotoletta (cutlet).

5. Cotoletta alla Milanese

Cotoletta alla Milanese certainly looks like a Wiener Schnitzel; in fact, the two dishes possibly stem from the same French preparation from the mid-1700s, according to La Cucina Italiana. Nonetheless, some fundamental distinctions separate the two, and you had better not try to order a schnitzel in Milan. Notably, the Viennese dish is often made with pork and covered with both flour and bread crumbs before being fried in oil or butter. (via Taste Atlas). The Milanese are the first to state that the dish has been a part of their cuisine since the 12th century. However, since cotoletta comes from the French word côtelette, it's hard to trace back its history under another name (via True Italian).

As for the traditional version of cotoletta (basically the only one considered to be an authentic Milanese cutlet), it uses a bone-in veal loin coated in bread crumbs. The dish is prepared such that the meat won't curl as it cooks — only in clarified butter to be deemed truly Milanese (via La Cucina Italiana). Copycat versions are made by pounding boneless pieces of veal meat into a thin, crispy cutlet nicknamed elephant ear; however, purists are opposed to the cheap rendition. Cotoletta can be served with risotto alla Milanese or simply with fries or mashed potatoes and some lemon wedges.

6. Osso Buco alla Milanese

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Osso buco is one of the more familiar meat preparations of Italian cuisine. It's no surprise that it's more common to find the dish named in Italian, since the English translation amounts to bone with hole (via The Guardian). Of course, the delicacy comes from what's inside the hole: bone marrow. The classic recipe comes from Milan, and purists will affirm that it is the only acceptable preparation.

Marcella Hazan, author of "The Classic Italian Cookbook," recommends using a cut from a calf's hind shank as it provides the tenderest meat (via The Guardian). The meat is first browned and then slowly braised with a sauté of onion, celery, and carrot, as well as tomato, white wine, and broth, Delallo explains. When served, a gremolada consisting of chopped parsley, garlic, lemon zest, and a hint of anchovy can be added over top. The Guardian notes that some recipes avoid tomatoes, but they do provide a pleasant acidity to the stew. To reach all of the decadent marrow, a special long narrow fork is used. The dish is filling and wholesome by itself, or it can be served with risotto alla Milanese, which is often cooked with bone marrow broth.

7. Risotto di Seppie alla Veneziana

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Whereas risotto alla Milanese is instantly recognizable by its bright yellow color, risotto di seppie alla Veneziana is inky black. In fact, the rice dish from Venice gets its color after soaking in either cuttlefish or squid ink, common in the surrounding Adriatic Sea (via The New York Times). The dish is also popular in Croatia, which sits on the other side of the sea. Aside from its striking color, the ink also provides the perfect degree of creaminess, making the consistency of the risotto as heavenly as you'd imagine. While it's easy to be hesitant when faced with a bowl of the stuff, the very best versions are made with the daily catch, so freshness is assured.

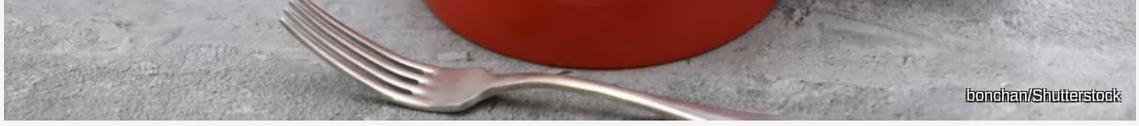
Aside from the ink, The New York Times notes that the cuttlefish itself is cut up into the dish, and the risotto is prepared with the usual suspects: rice, onion, olive oil, garlic, stock, white wine, and some parsley. Tomatoes or chili flakes are also included in some renditions. As for the flavor, chances are you'll enjoy it if you already like seafood, since the briny flavor is certainly noticeable; however, a delicate earthiness keeps the taste balanced.

8. Bottarga

With such a lengthy coastline, it should come as no surprise that many Italian specialties display seafood front and center. Great Italian Chefs describe bottarga as a sort of Mediterranean caviar, since it is, in fact, produced from fish roe. Swordfish and tuna roe sacs are commonly used, although the type of fish depends on the region. Traditionally, the preparation originates from the south of the country, specifically Sicily and Sardinia, although it has a history spanning back to the Greeks, according to historian Andrew Dalby (via Serious Eats).

Unlike other popular forms of fish roe, bottarga has been salted and cured, which was once necessary in order to preserve the delicate eggs. Layers of egg sacs are pressed together, cured, and then air-dried, according to Great Italian Chefs. The final product resembles a solid strip, often encased in a thin membrane to keep the texture soft. Bottarga can be served in many ways, and it is usually either sliced thinly or grated over a dish, much like truffles or Parmesan. Whether it's sprinkled over pasta, risotto, meat, or vegetables, the salty sea flavor is a versatile way to enhance a meal.

9. Baccalà



Baccalà is the name given to cod that has been salted and dried, a common practice in Italy that dates back to a time when the fish was especially abundant, according to Italy Magazine. The popular dish is prepared with dozens of regional variations and is often a mainstay on the table around Christmas time. The cod is soaked and the salt is washed off before it is prepared, leaving the flavor mild and open to absorbing any seasoning.

Baccalà mantecato, a style favored in Venice, is a dish where the fish is poached with garlic and then whipped with olive oil into a creamy texture that's perfect spread on a slice of crusty bread or served with grilled polenta (via Food52). Meanwhile, on the coast of Tuscany, the fish is often cooked with tomatoes, garlic, and basil (via Italy Magazine). In Vicenza in the northeast, Taste Atlas explains that the cod is simmered with milk, onion, garlic, and anchovies until it is soft and creamy and ready to serve with polenta. Another popular cooking method comes from Naples, where the salt cod is braised with capers, tomatoes, and olives for a decidedly salty meal (via Serious Eats).

10. Vitello Tonnato

When it comes to iconic dishes from the north of Italy, vitello tonnato from Piedmont is certainly a must-try. The combination of ingredients might sound peculiar, but trust us, the flavor pairings somehow work. Thin slices of veal are marinated in white wine and boiled. Nothing out of the ordinary here, but the meat is then covered in a creamy tuna, anchovy, and caper sauce and usually served cold (via Taste Atlas). There are variations to the preparation, and according to Life in Italy, homemade mayonnaise can also be incorporated into the sauce.

Surprisingly, the first published account of the recipe as it is today was in a cookbook written by the physician Angelo Dubini, entitled "The Kitchen for Weak Stomachs" (via Gambero Rosso). The book lists an assortment of simple, affordable meals that are easy to digest, including three versions of vitello tonnato. While veal smothered in a fishy sauce might not be everyone's idea of a dish that's light on the stomach, the preparation is a staple in many areas of northern Italy. Give it a try and you'll understand why the unexpected flavor pairing receives such praise.

11. Canederli

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Italy borders a number of countries, and this is especially evident in the cuisine from the northernmost region of South Tyrol, once a part of Austria (via The Guardian). Gone are the coastal vistas; here, towns are scattered around the Dolomite mountains. Consequently, the dining options are significantly different from the rest of Italy, and Austrian and German-style dishes are prevalent. According to Taste Atlas, like knödel,

canederli are dumplings made from stale bread, flour, milk, eggs, and speck (smoked pork belly). They are quite easy to make and since they require very few ingredients, the recipe is a fun one to try out at home.

The dumplings can be served in a broth, with stew or gravy, or simply with grated cheese and butter melted over top. Originating as a thrifty meal for farmers, canederli stem from very little — yet provide plenty of nourishment. While the most basic recipes rely on another dish providing much of the flavor, others incorporate ingredients such as spinach and garlic (via The Pasta Project). Sweet varieties stuffed with apricots or ricotta are also common ways to prepare the doughy balls.

12. Fritto Misto

Frito misto basically translates as fried mix, but the specifics of the assorted snacks vary by region. Along the coastline seafood is abundant, and Taste Atlas notes that crustaceans, mollusks, and tiny fish are lightly floured, deep-fried, and served as a crispy snack. In this case, the snack is referred to as fritto misto di mare (of the sea), and a simple sprinkle of salt and squeeze of lemon juice makes the dish complete (via Paesana). Whether it's the Gulf of Naples in the south or the Adriatic coast in the north, fried seafood is a popular snack.

Meanwhile, in regions inland from the sea, pretty much anything stands a chance of finding its way into a fritto misto. Vegetables, meat, cheese, cookies, olives, ravioli — really, the options are endless. The contents change regionally and seasonally, entirely based on the whims of the chef. In Piedmont, the dish can be as tame as some fried cheese or it might include veal brains (via Taste Atlas). The snack is often sold streetside in paper cones that soak up some of the oil while you stroll along, enjoying every crunchy bite. As with most fried treats, it's hard to go wrong with a serving of fritto misto, and the versatility of the preparation means that you can keep trying it and never get bored.

13. Ragù alla Bolognese

Whereas spaghetti and meatballs is a purely Italian American creation, ragù alla Bolognese is perhaps the original source of inspiration. The name comes from the dish's city of origin, Bologna, and Taste Atlas indicates that the preparation was first made by one of the pope's chefs. A ragù of minced meat — beef in the official recipe, although pork can be included too — as well as pancetta (or bacon), carrot, celery, onion tomatoes, wine, milk, salt, and pepper is cooked at low temperature.

Although it seems like a classic meal that must have been made for centuries, the first documented recipe dates to the end of the 1800s. Eventually, to assure the authenticity of ragù alla Bolognese, the recipe was registered in 1982 with the Bologna Chamber of Commerce (via Taste Atlas). Generally, the minced meat sauce is served with tagliatelle, a flat egg-based pasta noodle that is perfect for soaking up the rich ragù. Wider egg noodles such as pappardelle or fettucine are also commonly served with ragù alla Bolognese. Unlike the North American preparation with spaghetti, flat pasta allows more surface area for the sauce to stick so that every bite contains chunks of ragù.

14. Bistecca Fiorentina

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It might seem fairly basic, but bistecca Fiorentina — beef steak from Florence — is officially considered to be one of Tuscany's traditional food products. Consequently, there are specific requirements as to the type and preparation of the meat. According to Great Italian Chefs, the only breed of cattle permitted for the steak is Chianina, which produces prized lean meat. Visit Tuscany explains that the T-bone steak consists of both the filet and the sirloin cuts, providing a range of textures to the simple yet delicious dish. Each serving of bistecca Fiorentina weighs a couple of pounds and must be around two inches thick, so it's worth noting that unless you're really hungry, you're better off sharing.

As for the preparation, the beef is dry-aged for a couple of weeks and then seared for a few minutes on a hot grill for a rare finish (the only degree of doneness allowed). A sprinkle of salt and the occasional hint of rosemary or sage are the only seasonings added to the fine steak. At service, a generous drizzle of olive oil completes the flavorful dish, which is typically served with simple sides such as roast potatoes or spinach (via Philosokitchen).

15. Arancini

Who doesn't love a fried snack? Arancini are undoubtedly one of Italy's more popular crispy offerings, and it's not hard to see why. A mound of rice is stuffed with other ingredients such as meat, peas, cheese, or capers, then coated in breadcrumbs and deep-fried, creating a crunchy orange shell. In fact, the name arancini means little orange.

According to Best of Sicily, the snack dates back to when the Kalbid dynasty ruled Sicily in the 10th century. The Arabs brought rice to the island and typically flavored it with saffron, which was also introduced under their rule. While this origin story sounds plausible, the first official recipes for arancini date to the 19th century (via Italy Magazine). The fried snack is often sold curbside, thanks to the convenient format of the round or cone-shaped rice balls. There are plenty of creative variations as far as the fillings go, and sweet arancini made with sugar and cocoa are a popular treat. While you can enjoy the snack year-round, Taste Atlas notes that the fried balls are especially popular during the Santa Lucia festivities in Sicily on December 13.

16. Melanzane alla Parmigiana

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Melanzane alla parmigiana, aka eggplant Parmesan, has certainly made its way to the U.S. with great popularity. Unsurprisingly, its origin story is somewhat opaque, with people from the city of Parma viewing the dish as being from the north and southern Italians asserting that it comes from Naples or Sicily, according to La Cucina Italiana. Since the Arabs brought the eggplant to Sicily and parmigiana might refer to the word Persian in the local dialect, the southern theory seems more probable (via Taste Atlas). Nonetheless, lack of documentation and multiple words that might be related to the preparation or ingredients make the origin confusing to pinpoint. However, you'll quickly stop trying to figure it out once you have a bite of this deliciously comforting dish.

So it definitely contains eggplant and cheese, but what else? In the traditional recipe, layers of fried or grilled eggplant are alternated with a tomato basil sauce, and the whole is topped with grated cheese and then baked. Parmesan isn't generally used in traditional recipes and instead, mozzarella, Pecorino, scamorza, or caciocavallo are more common. The same preparation can be made with other vegetables such as zucchini, but the eggplant dish is a true classic.

17. Saltimbocca alla Romana

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Saltimbocca, which translates as jumps in the mouth, hints at the delightful blend of flavors you can expect. The Roman specialty may have been around earlier, but the first written record dates to the end of the 1800s, according to Taste Atlas. Again, some confusion as to the origin exists, since the same dish was already common in the city of Brescia in the north of Italy at the start of the 1800s.

The preparation is simple yet perfectly balanced and consists of pan-fried veal topped with a slice of prosciutto and a fresh sage leaf, held together with a toothpick. The whole is sautéed in white wine or butter. As a meat course, the dish is served with vegetables as a main dish following the pasta course. The ingredients are simple, yet the perfect balance of flavors makes this veal dish a treat — and one that you can easily re-create at home.

18. Cacio e Pepe

Cacio e pepe is the proof that you can do very much with very little. Two of the three ingredients are displayed in the name — for anyone who speaks Roman dialect that is. BBC Travel explains that cacio means sheep's cheese (usually Pecorino), pepe refers to black peppercorn, and the final item is, of course, pasta. Long noodles are best for coating with the creamy sauce, and spaghetti is an easy option though other types are also considered appropriate (via La Cucina Italiana).

While the ingredients are straightforward, the technique requires some practice. After cooking the pasta, some of the starchy water is stirred into the pasta with the grated cheese until the sauce emulsifies. There's plenty of room for error, but if the ideal conditions are met, the result is purely delicious. Finally, a generous crack of fresh black peppercorn adds a kick.

As always, BBC Travel notes that the origin story is fuzzy, and whether the dish was perfected by shepherds with minimal supplies or by poor factory workers in the city is anyone's guess. Nonetheless, a well-prepared plate of cacio e pepe pasta will leave you dreaming of little else. While it stems from a thrifty way to enjoy a nourishing meal, you can easily find luxed-up versions at restaurants where it is prepared tableside from inside of a wheel of cheese.

19. Gnocchi

While gnocchi is often served with sauce, much like pasta, it is composed of entirely different ingredients. The little plump dumplings are traditionally made from potatoes, which grow well in the cooler climate in the north of the country (via Delallo). According to Saveur, traditional potato gnocchi likely originated sometime around the 17th century, since the root vegetable was not introduced until then. The basic recipe requires a bit of flour to help shape the mounds, and many variations include egg as a binder. Alternate versions made with spinach, ricotta, pumpkin, corn flour, semolina, or bread are also typical in certain regions.

A simple tomato sauce is a popular pairing, but subtler flavors such as melted butter with fresh sage or cream sauces work well with the dumplings. Delallo notes that on the island of Sardinia, a sausage-based sauce is typical, whereas bacon, prosciutto, or vegetable blends are great options. Basil pesto also makes an excellent match for the neutral potato flavors. Ultimately, it's hard to go wrong.

Gnocchi is traditionally served in restaurants on Thursdays, so keep that in mind if you are visiting Italy and want to fit in with the locals. La Cucina Italiana notes that the custom stems from the Catholic tradition of skipping meat and only eating fish on Fridays. Filling up on a simple starchy meal the previous day was deemed a good way to prep for a day without meat.

20. Spaghetti alle Vongole

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As far as iconic Neapolitan dishes go, spaghetti alle vongole (with clams) is high up on the list. Being a city by the Mediterranean, Naples is the perfect location for dishes showcasing the briny flavors of the sea. Simple, classic and easily one of the best meals you'll have if it's properly made, spaghetti with clams requires very few ingredients. According to Taste Atlas, the main elements are already in the name, and the dish is finished with olive oil, garlic, and parsley. The pasta is first cooked al dente while the clams are lightly steamed, then the two are combined together with the rest.

Taste Atlas notes that a few components of the dish are up for debate. While some people swear by adding crushed or cherry tomatoes, others oppose the addition of the tomatoes, preferring the traditional bianco (Italian for white, to describe the dish's color). Some people add chili flakes to complement the flavors, yet once again it depends on who you ask. As for the pasta shape, spaghetti is probably the easiest to find, but the dish was originally made with thinner strands (vermicelli) and is regularly served with linguine or other long noodles (via Italy Magazine).

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The Rarest Foods You Need To Try At Least Once

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BY RYAN UNGER / UPDATED: SEPT. 16, 2022 12:41 PM EST

Every foodie has a bucket list of special dishes they intend on trying at least once in their lifetime to gain those ultimate bragging rights. Sometimes those dishes are simple and don't require much effort to obtain, but other times, in order to sample them they require extensive travel and a whole lotta moolah. These are the rare diamond-in-the-rough items that frolic through the heads of the food-obsessed every night while they dream. They're the sacred white buffaloes of the food world that seem unattainable. These are the bucket-list items that hold a special asterisk next to their names based on prestige.

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To the average person, it might seem insane to put so much effort into obtaining a taste of the rarest foods on the planet. However, any food-driven personality laughs at that sentiment, knowing full-well the culinary prize waiting for them at the end of the journey is something few might understand. Just like with someone obsessed with finding rare coins or ancient artifacts, the foodie world is enamored with collecting new flavors. And while flavors may only last a fraction of the time a physical artifact does, the memory of a taste lingers for years to come. *That's* what makes everything worth the effort (and money).

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Japanese Kobe Beef

If you visit upscale supermarkets, they usually carry more elusive cuts of meat like Wagyu or Kobe. But, before you sprint off to your local Whole Foods clamoring over the incredibly marbled cuts of Kobe beef, just know the meat you're seeing likely *isn't* the authentic thing. Sorry everyone, but *real* Kobe beef is incredibly rare and likely not what's presented in those display cases.

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It's an unfortunate reality for foodies everywhere gazing at menus with smiles plastered