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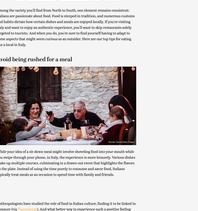
14 Tips For Eating Like A Local In Italy

BY LAUREN MINNITI | MAR. 30, 2022 | 7:00 AM EDT

Most foodies daydream about eating their favorite cuisine in its homeland. While some might imagine stacking down heaping bowls of ramen, others can themselves tasting strands of spaghetti from a plate piled high. If Italian food makes your mouth water, there's nothing more exciting than the idea of sampling some of the other side of the Atlantic. Although the U.S. is over 30 times larger than the European nation, Italy's culinary diversity should not be underestimated.



Among the variety you'll find from North to south, your dominant cuisine wanderlust: Italians are passionate about food. Food is steeped in tradition, and numerous customs and habits dictate how certain dishes and meals are enjoyed locally. If you're visiting Italy and want to enjoy an authentic experience, you'll want to skip restaurants solely catering to tourists. Instead, follow these tips, you're sure to find yourself having a delicious meal in some superior fare might seem curious as an outsider. Here are our top tips for eating like a local in Italy.

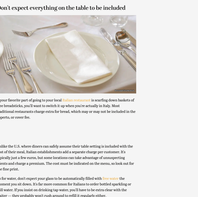
Avoid being rushed for a meal

When your plate's all cut down and might involve dwindling food into your mouth while you swipe through your phone, in Italy, the experience is more leisurely. Various dishes take time to cook, marinate, cool, cut, and so on. Some are served cold, highlighting the flavors on the plate. Instead of using the time purely to consume and savor food, Italians typically treat meals as an occasion to spend time with family and friends.

Anthropologists have studied the role of food in Italian culture, finding it to be linked to pleasure (via Taylor & Francis), and what better way to experience such a positive feeling than to linger over a meal? Although Italy's fast-paced contemporary culture has caused lunch to Italy's foreign fast food expansion in life, although eating lunch on the go has become more prevalent in the last years, it still remains changes in daily work schedules, the traditional philosophy is to slow down. True to that point, in Italy, lunchtime was born in Italy, leading to an international movement that highlights local gastronomic uncertainty and the joys of sharing them in a relaxed atmosphere.

If you're probably watch as a corner bakery, there's no need to linger at the counter. It's best to maximize your time discovering a city. However, when you make a point to take a seat at a restaurant, give yourself enough time to savor the experience without checking your watch every few minutes.

Understand the coffee etiquette



Sure, you could ignore the local coffee culture and order a cappuccino with lunch, but we know pasta with water is liberal in. For starters, seek out a bar, which is the place you'd get your morning coffee in Italy. Coffee shops, aka caffè, offer a more elaborate setting where you could sit for many the time, but for a simple coffee, you'll want to bar and place your order at the till. Once you've paid, you'll receive a receipt in hand off to the barista. You'll have the option of drinking your coffee at the counter or seated — you'll most likely be asked your preference by the cashier since the latter boosts the price.

Don't expect fancy drinks with creaminess add-ins. The most basic is an espresso, which is a standard caffè. It will probably be smaller than what you're used to, so order a caffè lungo or americano if you want extra water. For more coffee get a doppio or a double, and if you want a splash of milk get a macchiato. Unless you want a glass of milk, ask for a caffè latte or a latte macchiato, and skip the cafe frappe drinks past mid-morning. After a meal, opt for a simple caffè, or if the day calls for imbibing, order a digestivo (digestive) or amaro (bitter) to help your body digest. Learn about getting your coffee to go just same the brief pause from service.

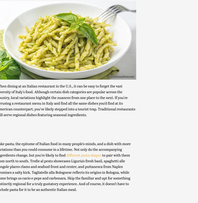
Don't expect everything on the table to be included

If your favorite part of going to your local trattoria/osteria is scarfing down baskets of free breadsticks, you'll want to switch it up when you're actually in Italy. Most traditional restaurants charge extra for bread, which may or may not be included in the coupeta, or cover fee.

Unlike the U.S. where diners can safely assume their table setting is included with the cost of their meal, Italian establishments add a separate charge per customer. It's typically just a few euros, but some locations can take advantage of unsuspecting clients and charge a premium. The cost must be indicated on the menu, so look out for the fine print.

As the waiter, don't expect your glass to be automatically filled with Italian wine. Instead, you'll need to flag your waiter and request a bottle of water or sparkling or still water. If you insist on drinking tap water, you'll have to be extra nice with the waiter — they probably won't rush around to refill it regularly either.

Adapt to local dining hours



It's natural to take on some of the local customs while traveling and adapting to the eating schedules will save you a lot of trouble. If you have lunch before noon and dinner at 6 pm or later, you'll need to stretch out the hours unless you only want to dine at restaurants that solely cater to tourists.

Lunch is meter to adjust to, especially if you are just grabbing a sandwich on the go. However, if you want to lunch down for a longer meal, pushing the start to 12:30 or 1 p.m. should yield more options. In fact, it's common for stores to close around 1 p.m. and reopen around 3 or 4 p.m. Dinner, on the other hand, is a time for families to come home for a proper meal.

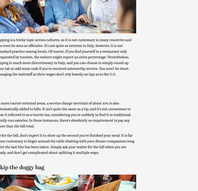
Typically, seeking dinner time is happening before 7 p.m., and that's still pushing it as many people dine around 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. Due to seasonal variation in temperature and the influence of surrounding countries, people tend to dine a bit earlier in the colder than in the hot South. Of course, that doesn't mean there's no fun to be had earlier. Prior to dinner, Italians mark the transition from the workday to the evening during aperitivo, with a drink and some light snacks from about 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Eat the regional specialties

When dining at an Italian restaurant in the U.S., it can be easy to forget the vast diversity of Italy's food. Although certain dish categories are popular across the country, the specifics of what's served can vary significantly from region to region. If you're comparing a restaurant menu in Italy and find all the same dishes you'd find at an American counterpart, you're likely stepped into a tourist trap. Traditional restaurants will serve regional dishes featuring seasonal ingredients.

Take pasta, the epitome of Italian food in many people's minds, and a dish with more variations than you could remember in a lifetime. Not only do the accompanying sauces change from region to region, the shape of the pasta, too. Pesto originates from Liguria in the north, while the pasta dominant in Lazio is bucatini, a hollow tube with a tangle-like shape and stuffed from and rooted, and parmesan from Naples promises a salty kick. Tagliatelle also hungover reflects its origins in Bologna, while Rome brings us cacio e pepe and carbonara. Skip the familiar and opt for something distinctly regional for a truly positive experience. And of course, it doesn't have to include pasta for it to be an authentic Italian meal.

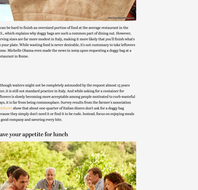
Learn the menu categories



If you're used to reading English menus in the U.S., it'll take a bit of adjustment to understand the organization of Italian menus. Instead of listing out the different dishes in numbers before the meal, is a list of a prelude to start everything off. Food marinated vegetables, cheese, charcuterie, and seasoned vegetables. Next comes the primo first, which is the introduction to the meal and can include appetizers like soup, or meat charcuterie, pasta. Don't expect to sit down to a heaping portion of spaghetti if it's your primo; it is merely intended as a light offset flavor packed start.

Following the primo is the secondo, or second course, which usually features meat or fish. Proteins are usually simply prepared and either grilled or baked. There also usually is a side dish, or contorno, that's served with the secondo. Vegetables are usually cooked, and rarely consisting of vegetables. Many sauces are not that extensive, and veggies are steamed or grilled to make the natural flavors stand out. Let's not forget the dolce or dessert, often served with coffee and followed by a digestivo liquor to promote healthy digestion.

Understand the billing and tipping culture

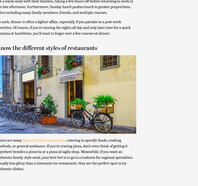


Tipping is a tricky topic across cultures, as it is not customary in many countries and can even be considered offensive. It's not quite so extreme in Italy, however, it is not customary to tip 20% or even 15% like in the U.S. Although service charges are frequently tacked, the nation's staff expect an extra percentage. Nonetheless, tipping is much more discretionary in Italy, and you can choose to simply round up your tab or add some cash if you've received outstanding service. You won't be short changing the waitstaff as their wages don't rely heavily on tips as in the U.S.

In more tourist oriented areas, a service charge (servizio) of about 10% is also commonly added to bills. It isn't quite the same as a tip, and it's not necessary to hear it referred to as a tourist tax, considering you're unlikely to find it in traditional Italian restaurants. In tourist restaurants, there's absolutely no expectation to tip more than the bill total.

As for the bill, don't expect it to show up the second you're finished your meal. It is far more customary to linger around the table chatting with your dinner companions long after the last bite has been taken. Simply ask your waiter for the bill when you are ready, and don't get complicated about splitting it multiple ways.

Skip the doggy bag



It can be hard to finish an oversized portion of food at the average restaurant in the U.S., which explains why doggy bags are such a common part of dining out. However, serving sizes are far more modest in Italy, making it more likely that you'll finish what's on your plate. While wasting food is never desirable, it's not customary to take leftovers home. Michelle Obama even made the news in 2009 upon requesting a doggy bag at a restaurant in Rome.

Although waiters might not be completely astounded by the request almost 13 years later, it still not standard practice in Italy. And while asking for a container for leftovers is slowly becoming more acceptable among people motivated to curb wastefulness, it's far from being commonplace. Survey results from the Rome's association Confesercenti show that about one-quarter of Italian diners don't ask for a doggy bag. Venues they simply don't need to or find it to be rude. Instead, focus on enjoying meals in good company and savoring every bite.

Save your appetite for lunch

If your day starts with a large plate of bacon, eggs, toast, and the works, followed by a salad on the go and a hearty dinner, you'll need to make a few adjustments to fit in like a local in Italy. Although breakfast is a meal, it doesn't typically involve a bacon with a supersize or espresso, so it's natural that appetites may be lackluster.

Although routines are changing as modern work schedules get in the way, lunch has commonly been the most significant meal of the day. Locals regularly return home to eat a warm meal with their families, taking a few hours of leisure returning to work to the late afternoon. Furthermore, Sunday lunch pushes lunch to greater proportions, often including many family members, friends, and multiple courses.

As such, dinner is often a lighter affair, especially if you partake in a post-work aperitivo. Of course, if you're starting the night off drinking and only have time for a quick pasta at lunchtime, you'll want to linger over a few courses at dinner.

Know the different styles of restaurants

There are many types of Italian restaurants — catering to specific foods, cooking methods, or general ambiance. If you're craving pizza, don't even think of getting a sit-down meal at a pizzeria, which is a casual, family-friendly place. For an authentic family-style meal, your best bet is to go to a trattoria for regional specialties. Usually less pricey than a ristorante (or restaurant), they are the perfect spot to try authentic dishes.

A ristorante, on the other hand, tends to offer more of a fine dining experience where you would likely sit for several courses. An osteria could be a local bar with a small selection of typical dishes — the perfect place for a simple meal in the company of Italians. For a self-serve option, look for signs indicating a tavola calda, or warm table, where you can choose from ready-made dishes in a casual environment.

If you're running around sightseeing, you'll want to make a quick pit stop at a tavola calda for a quick meal in proximity and light snacks. When travel will want to pop into an osteria to taste the regional wines and then to stay you'll want to enjoy a frozen treat from the gelateria.

Outside of the city, agriturismos are farm-to-table restaurants that usually have an unrushed accommodation to turn your meal into an overnight trip. Or, hike up a mountain in the Dolomites and eat at a refugio with a dazzling view.

Make time for aperitivo

Although it's not quite happy hour, aperitivo is sure to raise your spirits. From around 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. or later, Italians gather at bars and restaurants to enjoy a drink and light snacks. Some aperitivo venues charge a fee for the snacks, while others provide them free of charge. Regardless, it's a time to relax and socialize with friends and family after a long day. Although it's not a meal, it's a time to linger and enjoy the company of others.

or 7 p.m. to 8 or 9 p.m., Italians get together for a drink and some snacks. For a traditional experience, order a bitter drink such as Campari, which is intended to whet the appetite. This is also Aperol spritz's time to shine; wine, beer, and cocktails are also popular. Naturally, non-alcoholic drinks are available too, as the main prerequisite is that you have some sort of beverage in hand.

Aperitivo varies regionally and even from bar to bar, however, you can always expect something to nibble on with your drink. Whether you get a bowl of potato chips, charcuterie, cheese, assorted antipasti, or even a buffet is up to the discretion of the establishment. In the latter case, you might see it labeled as apericena, a union of aperitivo and cena, or dinner in Italian. Often, you'll also pay in consequence, and drinks can be a bit pricier to make up for the inclusion of food.

Aside from being a time to sip on a chilled drink and savor salty snacks, aperitivo is the moment to come together with friends or family to relax after a long day. Dating back a few centuries to Piedmont in Northern Italy, the tradition has spread across the country, though Milan is arguably still the epicenter of more elaborate aperitivos.

Shop at open-air food markets

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If you're in Italy for more than a few days and have access to a kitchen, you may want to source some fresh ingredients to cook. Whether you're amping up your culinary game or simply plating freshly sliced tomatoes with basil and a drizzle of olive oil, a visit to the local outdoor market is a must. Depending on the size of the area you are visiting, you may find daily or weekly markets. Some might host farmers from the surrounding area, while others might just consist of local vendors selling their goods outdoors.

Regional specialties are primarily highlighted, offering a glimpse into the daily life of residents. Venice is known for its fish, Bologna has a reputation for excellent cheese and cured meats, and the market in Palermo is around 1,000 years old. Some markets also mix in vendors selling non-food wares, providing a one-stop shop for assorted needs. For an easy lunch, pick up some picnic items and make your way to a piazza or park to enjoy your loot.

Don't assume all your favorite dishes are popular

Luai Fahmawi/Getty Images

Part of traveling to a new country is discovering local specialties you've never tasted before. While you might be excited about digging into cheesy pizzas and plates piled high with spaghetti, it's worth keeping an open mind. Several dishes that are ubiquitous at Italian restaurants in the U.S. may not be common, let alone typical, in Italy.

When Italian immigrants first started arriving in the States at the turn of the 20th century, they had to adapt their traditional recipes to fit the ingredients they could source. Additionally, many came from the South of Italy, reflecting a different view of Italian cuisine. While undoubtedly delicious, many dishes we've grown to love did not originate in the boot-shaped country.

Spaghetti and meatballs might be a favorite west of the Atlantic, but in Italy, you're more likely to find the meatballs (aka polpette) served in a sauce or a baked casserole. Meanwhile, avoid asking for a pepperoni pizza unless you're looking for a pie topped with bell peppers; in Italy, you should order salami. You'll be hard-pressed to find garlic bread too, though bruschetta is an excellent alternative. Prepare your palate for novel flavors and you won't be disappointed. And if you're still missing your usual dishes — they'll still be there when you get home.

Use the bread as an accompaniment

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If bread and butter sounds like an excellent appetizer, you'll want to modify your habits at an Italian restaurant. Keep in mind that the bread basket is likely not included, so don't mindlessly chew away if you aren't actually interested in eating it. Instead of being a feature of a meal, bread is a standard staple at the table. It is served to consume along with the various dishes of your meal, commonly as a way to mop up extra sauce on your plate (a technique known as fare la scarpetta) or to neutralize your palate.

Since it is meant to go with other food, don't expect olive oil as an extra for dipping your bread. Although there might be a bottle on the table, it is usually only brought with salads. Furthermore, central areas of Italy don't commonly salt their bread, which is yet another reason why it is intended to be consumed with other ingredients. Skip the bread between bites of pasta, unless you need to scoop up leftover sauce once you've polished off the dish.

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