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When in Italy

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How to pass for a native and have the best possible food in Italy.



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CHAPTER ONE



What's Good to Eat Around Here?

To eat the best regional food, you'll need to know three things: a bit of the history of the area, the lay of the land around you, and the time of year. Each of these factors has a major impact on which dishes you should order.

Knowing the history of a region is important because for most of its modern history there was no true Italy. From the fall of the Roman Empire in about 465 until 1860, Italy was just a geographical expression of “the boot”. Various countries, Austria, France, and Spain, in particular, occupied the territory, and city-states ruled by powerful families were the norm. Naturally these occupiers brought their own food traditions with them, many of which still lurk somewhere in the make up of dishes served in Italy today.

The geography of the land will dictate what is available locally. Habitat and climate are critical. When in hill country eat lamb, goat, and boar, because sheep, goats and wild boar live there. Boar and other wild game are also found in forests. On the other hand, in sandy country and in forests. On the other hand, a river valley produces lush green fields and where there are fields there are milk-producing cows and lots of pigs, and where there are fields there are ferent vegetables will grow there too. If the land is damp and hot, dif- and ask yourself, “What would logically grow or live here?” Look around you before you order.



in a dry, rocky landscape. Observe

And finally, keep in mind the time of year. Italians always eat fresh foods, especially seasonal fruits, and vegetables when they are at their peak and plentiful. Italians want to eat fruits and vegetables as near to the time of harvest as possible and aren't particularly impressed by foods that are out-of-season or that have been shipped a long distance. Rarely will you find restaurants serving asparagus in December or figs in spring. Cold weather keeper-foods like cabbage, winter squash and beets are eaten in winter.

A term to keep in mind is *casareccia*, or home-made. Italian restaurants that specialize in traditional cuisine - home-grown and provincial - will term their style of cooking *casareccia*. Only in the last twenty years or so will you find dishes like spaghetti alla vodka in Italy. Traditionally, Italians cook with wine, not Russian liquor. Nor will you find spaghetti with salmon. Salmon live far from the waters off Italy and therefore have no place in traditional Italian cuisine. If you want to eat *casareccia*, and believe me you do, then you'll connect directly to the Italian past and learn how food connects to the land.

