

RESTAURANT BASICS IN ITALY



O V E R V I E W

Who doesn't love to discover new places to eat, especially when on vacation? If you are like me and love dining out, with so many choices it's hard to choose. To me, researching where to eat is just as important as planning my activities.

I have my favorite places that I return to year after year and then I add new ones as well. A great meal in a fabulous restaurant makes your vacation that much more memorable. So does having the perfect glass of wine!

Many people say you can't get a bad meal in Italy. That is NOT TRUE! They have tourist traps just like any other city. These tourist restaurants sell mass-produced, pre-made frozen food with very little focus on the food. If you see a menu with pictures or written in five different languages that is a sure sign it's a tourist menu. Most of the touristy places are centered around the main sites, where you see the waiters standing out front in tuxedos asking you to come inside. Don't fall for it - they are overpriced and with such a small amount of time spent dining why waste it on mediocre food.

It's best to dine where the menus are in Italian. However, now days many are also in English. You are better off to try and read from the Italian version. When the menu is translated to English something is lost in translation. For example, baked pasta with egg was actually Mac and Cheese. Quiche - turned out to be a fabulous flat bread pizza. Nothing like the quiche here in the states.

My recommendations are not only Michelin rated places but I also focus more on the family owned trattorias, osterias and cafes. In Italy, it is not just about the food; the atmosphere is just as important. Imagine having a light snack while admiring the view of the Vatican while the sun is setting.

I enjoy eating where locals eat, however, I'm not much for eating too authentic such as tripe and innards. I'll leave that to the locals and the more adventurous foodies.

GOOD TO KNOW

Sitting vs. Standing at the Bar/Counter - If you sit at a table, you may incur a service charge or “servizio.” This increasingly common charge is found in areas like Florence and Rome. If you stand at the counter to enjoy your espresso or pastry the price is usually about half what it would be if you decide to sit at a table. The additional charge goes to the restaurant to help offset the cost of staff.

Cover charge - Most restaurants charge a cover for table seating, listed as “coperta” on the menu and receipt. This is typically €2-3 per person, including children, but in touristy areas, the cover charge can be higher. This fee is just for occupying space; it does not cover the bread, water, or services, so skipping the free bread they bring will not reduce the fee. The coperta must be listed on the menu; if it's not on there, you may have it waived.

The Check - Italians will rarely rush you through your meal. You can sit there all night if you would like. It is considered rude for the waiter to bring your check until you have requested the check. **You must ask for the check to be presented. The magic word is "conto".**

Tipping - It is not customary to tip in Italy. In major tourist cities, it is beginning to be expected that Americans will tip. Whether you do or don't is ultimately up to you, but it is a good idea to tip if you have received outstanding service or if your table has been particularly demanding. If you choose to tip, the amount is not based on a percentage of the overall bill. It is usually just a few €1-2 coins or rounding the bill up to the nearest 0 or 5.

Bottled Water (Gas or No Gas) - Restaurants generally serve bottled water with table service for a fee. Though a few restaurants are beginning to offer filtered water by the glass, it is not the norm.

Cappuccino - In Italy, it is considered disgusting to add milk to your coffee after 11:00 a.m. – Italians will full-body cringe if they see it. Cappuccinos are considered a breakfast drink only, while straight espresso is preferred for afternoons. Exceptions are made for the espresso macchiato, a shot of espresso with dollop of milk foam on top, and the marroccino, a shot of espresso with chocolate and a little milk (basically a mini-mocha). Coffee is typically ordered, served, and consumed standing at the bar; sitting at a table with your coffee with usually incur a coperta (cover charge). Of course, several Americans still order their cappuccino after dinner, your waiter will kindly serve it to you if you order it.

GOOD TO KNOW

Reservations - Reservations are big in Italy. Generally, dining early around 7:00 or 7:30 you can find a table, however, the best tables will be reserved for guests with reservations. It's always better to have the hotel call ahead and make a reservation in advance.

Dinner Time - Italians eat dinner late, usually around 8:00-9:00. Prior to dinner they go for an aperitivo at a bar or enoteca (wine bar). This is similar to, but not quite the same thing as a happy hour. Many bars offer a complimentary snack buffet, usually cured meats and cheeses, to guests ordering wine or cocktails to tide them over until dinnertime.

Ordering Wine - Most places will bring a small plate of meat, cheese, and olives to you when you order a glass or bottle of wine. The Italians believe that wine should be drunk with food.

Uno for Duo - If you would like to split a dish, you can tell the waiter "uno for duo" meaning one dish for the two of you so split.

Ristorante - This generally applies to a serious place to eat, with linen tablecloths, stem wine glasses, and fine dining. It will be more expensive and a typical dinner will last for two to three hours.

Osteria - It used to indicate a place to enjoy a glass of wine and eat a casual meal, similar to an enoteca, but is now usually interchangeable with trattoria.

Trattoria - Traditionally a casual place to drink wine and eat home-style regional cooking - the kind of place with bare wooden tables. Some of the trattorias have evolved over the years and have become more formal, expensive but kept their original name.

Enoteca - This can be used in different ways around town: it can be a wine store, a wine bar, or a restaurant that prides itself on its special wine list. This is a nice place to go for a nice glass of wine and a light meal without ordering 4 or 5 courses.

THE MENU IN COURSES

Antipasto (appetizer) - Most menus will have a few traditional antipasti such as: crostini, bruschetta (brus ket ta), prosciutto and salami. Fruits are seasonal - don't expect to see melon in the winter or figs in the summer.

Primi - This will generally be soups, a nice selection of pastas, gnocchi, polenta and risotto dishes. Pastas are generally specific to the region such as pici in Siena, risotto and polenta are served up north.

Secondi - This is the meat course such as bistecca alla fiorentina which is popular in Florence and Tuscany. It is a thick slab of T-bone steak that is grilled until barely rare and served with only salt and olive oil. It is sold by weight so pay attention to the price on the menu. Other meat items include arista (roasted pork loin), vitello arrosto (roasted veal), coniglio (rabbit), cinghiale (wild boar), along with fish and chicken dishes.

Contorni (side dishes) - Here at home we are used to main dishes that come with meat and a side vegetable or two on the plate. In Italy, you need to order the sides separately. They will be brought at the same time as the secondi if you remember to order them. The most common are fagioli (beans), usually white beans cooked with garlic and sage; spinaci (spinach), and patate arrosto (roasted potatoes).

Insalate (salad) - Small and simple salads are interchangeable with a vegetable contorno. The most common insalata is mista, a small bowl of lettuce, tomato, radicchio and some shredded carrot. The dressing is brought to the table which is olive oil and red wine vinegar. Don't expect ranch, thousand island or blue cheese dressings in Italy. Some restaurants will cater to the Americans by offering large salads but don't expect it in most restaurants.

Formaggi (cheese) - If the menu offers a cheese section, the choices will usually be a pecorino (sheep cheese), Gorgonzola (soft blue cheese), or caprino (goat cheese). They may come drizzled with honey or accompanied by a tart fruit mostarda (a kind of chutney).

Dolci (dessert) - The dessert list is standard at most places. A lot of diners opt for just biscotti and vin santo which is a nice dessert wine to dip the biscotti. Torta della nonna, a custard pie topped with pine nuts or almonds, Zuccotto, a concoction of sponge cake and sweet ricotta. Panna cotta is a light flavored custard topped with chocolate, caramel or berries, tiramisù and torta al cioccolato is typically a low, dense chocolate cake. You can ask if the desserts are made in house by asking "fatti in casa".

Digestivi - Just when you thought your marathon meal was coming to an end, the waiter arrives to offer you a digestivo. Italians often refer to this as the ammazzacaffe the "coffee killer". You drink the coffee to clear your head of all the wine you drank then you drink grappa, or limoncello to digest your meal.