

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding authentic Italian cuisine
- » Discovering the role of culture in the Italian kitchen
- » Knowing how ancient strategies work in the modern kitchen
- » Enjoying the seasons at the table
- » Understanding the importance of the pantry
- » Putting this book to use and making genuine Italian food

Chapter **1**

Cooking the Italian Way: That's Amore!

Love is the common denominator that binds the cuisine of each Italian region together to create a national treasure. Before discussing individual recipes and techniques, one must conjure up a sense of *amore* in order to be a great Italian cook. A deep sense of love for oneself, for those you're cooking for, for the recipes and the regions themselves, and for the producers of the ingredients – let them inspire you to place a premium on cooking and eating well in the first place. Keeping those topics close to your heart and mind will inspire you to cook Italian food well.

Even if you've never cooked Italian food before, there's no need to be intimidated. Despite Italy's long, rich, and varied culinary history, the tips and techniques in this book prove how simple, accessible, straightforward, mouthwatering, and healthful Italian food can be.

Appreciating How History and Geography Shaped Italian Cuisine

Italians take cuisine very seriously while enjoying it to the fullest. In addition to mere fuel for the body, food is viewed as a source of daily pleasure and culinary medicine that should be savored. Along with fashion, music, art, architecture, design, and other artisan crafts, authentic cooking and food products are important parts of the culture that are a source of pride for Italians. Italians believe that the more informed we are on where our food comes from (both in the historical and geographical sense), the more we will appreciate it and enjoy it. In addition, understanding the history behind a dish helps to preserve its place in history by creating a place for it on the culinary landscape that won't soon be forgotten. Taking the time to learn about Italian history and the unique features of its geography gives you the knowledge needed to serve the proper dishes at the right time of day and during the right season. It also enables you to pair foods together more easily and get the most out of seasonal produce. In short, knowledge of Italian history and geography helps to give you the mindset that an Italian naturally brings to the kitchen.

What Italians consider to be their cuisine varies greatly from how others around the world describe it. True Italian cuisine is recognized as the regional foods and recipes that make up the traditional classics that have been enjoyed for decades, centuries, and even millennia. There are a few ubiquitous and world-renowned creations that Italians claim as their collective own, such as pizza, pasta, risotto, gelato, and panettone. In the modern world, those recipes are carefully guarded, protected, and considered to be part of the culinary patrimony of the nation. These edible ambassadors make Italians proud when they are successfully recreated around the globe.

If you scratch a bit deeper beyond the surface, however, you will note that each of those dishes is linked to a particular place, such as the pizza of Naples, or they come from a larger category, such as pasta, which has different regional variations. Italians describe their own food by region, town, or city. *Ragù Bolognese* (from Bologna), *Torta Caprese* (from Capri), *Carciofi all Romana* (from Rome), and so on. As a result, to truly understand Italian cuisine, you must learn about Italy's regions, culture, and history.

Food in every Italian region is the most highly celebrated aspect of the culture. Appreciated for being a daily source of pleasure, joy, and health, Italian food is a way of life. Chapter 2 discusses how time-honored traditions in agriculture and in cooking have woven their way into the tapestry of Italian daily life. By reading that chapter, you get a better sense of the role that food plays, beyond fuel, in an Italian's life. By learning about highlights in Italian culinary history, you quickly

can identify how the cuisines of various regions have both common denominators and unique qualities.

Regardless of which Italian region you spend time in, you'll be able to taste the layers of history that it has experienced. From ancient indigenous inhabitants, to foreign rulers, and fancy courts, many factors have contributed to make Italian cuisine a microcosm of the influences that have shaped the course of Mediterranean history. The mere notion of food as culture itself has, for centuries, enhanced Italian cuisine and enabled it to become the most popular cuisine in both the world and the United States today.

Many newcomers to “real” Italian cuisine from abroad are surprised to learn that some of their favorites — which may have been Italian-American dishes or just improperly prepared recipes — are actually not part of a true Italian repertoire. Others still are surprised to learn just how simple, straightforward, mouthwatering, and healthful Italian food can be.



REMEMBER

In the United States, only one-third of the Italian foods eaten actually come from Italy. The rest are either falsely advertised or adaptations. In many cases, even the foods that are imported from Italy are not prepared properly. For this reason, many Italian recipes have *disciplinari*, or production guidelines, on the ways in which they should be made correctly. Pesto sauce from Genoa and pizza from Napoli are two examples of such recipes.

Back to Basics: Applying Ancient Strategies in the Modern Kitchen

Some cooking trends that are perfectly in line with our modern, fast-paced, even urban lifestyles, believe it or not, began in antiquity! Ancient ways of adding flavor to foods, the notion of culinary medicine, building on base recipes, making smart use of leftovers, and using seasonal produce are a few of my favorites. Thousands of years ago, aromatics such as garlic, onions, and leeks along with fresh herbs and spices were the “go to” flavor enhancers for recipes. Since these ingredients were available, they were combined in ingenious ways to not only make food taste better, but also provide relief and protection from illnesses and disease. Long before “culinary medicine” was a recognized term, food was used to heal the body and keep illness at bay. This concept fits perfectly with modern trends and provides easy and inexpensive ways to flavor our recipes without excess calories or fat.

For centuries, good Italian cooks relied on base recipes. Many of these, such as stock and bread crumbs, were created by using kitchen leftovers efficiently. You can use these same methods to cut down on your carbon footprint while saving money and eating more wholesome foods. Up until very recently, Italian cooks did not have the “luxury” of using out-of-season produce. Forced to use what was local and seasonal, their diet was based upon the nutrients that their bodies craved the most during each season. Even though modern supermarkets provide just about any food any time of year, health experts agree that local and seasonal ingredients do our bodies the most good. The more that we can incorporate these types of “ancient” practices in our modern lives, the better off our wallets, waistlines, and environments will be for it.

Building on base recipes

Chapter 3 discusses the importance of base recipes in Italian cuisine. It may sound boring to an avid cook, desiring to quickly recreate their favorite dishes, to take a few hours to create these “recipes,” but I can attest that it is time well spent.

For millennia, Italian home cooks have been doing “inactive cooking” by simmering stock on the stove, soaking beans, and other activities while they were busy attending to other things. They saved leftover bread to make bread crumbs, crostini, and bruschetta. They also cooked beans and legumes on a weekly basis to be added to recipes as needed. By adopting these ancient practices, you can be sure to not only make good use of time and money, but create healthier and tastier dishes as well.

Enjoying the seasons at the table

Seasonality at the Italian table refers to two things. The first is the time of year and the produce and types of fish and meat that are available during that period. The second involves the role that seasonal foods play in celebrating Italian holidays and Sunday suppers. Thanks to open air markets, butcher shops, and fish markets or marinas in most Italian neighborhoods, the average person in Italy is keenly aware of what is in season and when, and it is those foods that are most sought after. Television cooking shows, cookbooks, and food magazines in Italy all discuss seasonality and feature seasonal items. Because Italian holidays fall during the same seasons each year, certain seasonal foods (such as artichokes, asparagus, and lamb at Easter) are always on the menu. Familiarizing yourself with what is in season will set you up for success in the Italian kitchen.

Featuring seasonal foods

Did you know that eating seasonal produce is actually better for your body than eating fruits and vegetables that are out of season? Italians are consistently ranked among the healthiest people in Europe, and their eating and lifestyle patterns are to be thanked. Chapter 4 teaches how our bodies actually crave (nutritionally) the foods that grow in various times of the year as well as how to prepare them and plan meals around them. Since ancient times, Italian menus have always been produce-forward and dependent upon the seasons. Learning to cook and meal-plan this way is good for your wallet and your waistline, while ensuring that you eat the most fully flavored produce.

Even if you've never planned meals seasonally before, the tips in Chapter 4 will enable you to make the most of spring, summer, winter, and fall menus. Because the seasons fall at different times of year in different places, and various locations have unique agricultural patterns, it is best to plan what works for your growing conditions. A true Italian cook can always adapt to the location by employing traditional techniques with the best produce on hand. They cannot, however, tolerate produce that isn't at its best.

Celebrating holidays big and small

To master authentic Italian cuisine, you must learn the basics of the *piano della domenica*, or Sunday lunch, still ritually enjoyed by 70 percent of modern Italians. This weekly highlight is as much a pleasure to prepare as it is to eat and share with family and friends. With a few tips to remember, you can transport yourself to Italy, at least to the table, with ease and joy.

Italian holiday menus and recipes are anticipated around the globe. Every joyous occasion, from Christmas and Winter holidays like Carnevale and St. Joseph's Day, to Lent, Easter, and the Spring holidays, all have traditional recipes that are like edible time capsules just begging to be recreated. You learn the easiest ways to recreate these elaborate recipes, how to serve them, and the customs behind them. Whether you are having a light dinner at home, entertaining guests, or eating on the go, the menus in Chapter 4 enable you to experience them with Italian flavor and flair.

Get Ready, Get Set!

Head into your kitchen with confidence and the knowledge that you can make masterpieces with relatively little equipment and few ingredients. Just flour, water, and your hands can open up worlds of culinary creativity. That said, there

are a few recipes which will be made much more easily with the aid of a few simple tools. If you're going to make fresh tomato sauce, ravioli, gnocchi, pesto sauce, or fresh pasta or bread, be sure to have on hand the items mentioned in this section.

Gathering the tools you need . . . and then some

Italian cooks are very innovative, and over the course of history they've made many substitutions to their list of kitchen equipment. However, I like to keep it as simple as possible — for example, I do not use an immersion blender at home or a pasta maker. I blend my soup and vegetables with a hand-cranked food mill as Italians have done for centuries, and I choose to roll out my pasta by hand with a rolling pin because it is the ancient way of doing it and it provides a more interesting texture. That said, once you have your basic needs covered (pots, pans, sharp knives, a pasta strainer, spatulas, ladles, and a rolling pin), having the following items on hand will make your life in the kitchen easier. Add them to your arsenal as desired, or come up with your own substitutes.

- » Cannoli molds
- » Dough scraper
- » Food mill (for transforming tomatoes into the proper consistency for fresh sauce without the seeds)
- » Food processor
- » Immersion blender
- » Meat hammer
- » Moka espresso pot and demitasse cups for espresso
- » Mortar and pestle
- » Pasta machine
- » Potato ricer (for prepping potatoes for gnocchi the proper way)
- » Ravioli cutters
- » Specific pans including large roasting pans and cake pans

Stocking important pantry items

Pantries are every bit as relevant today as they were 500 years ago. Whether you're tired at the end of a long day of work, or snowed inside on a stormy day, your

access to nutritious and convenient food becomes more limited, just as it was for our ancestors when crops were less abundant. Why turn to fast food and delivery when you can create something better from your own cabinet? Chapter 5 arms you with the tools needed to make luscious and memorable meals right from your own pantry.

Chapter 5 also teaches you how to read Italian labels so you get the most for your money at the store. Ever wondered about the difference between a DOP mozzarella and one without the quality seal? Chapter 5 delves into the distinctions between Italian quality seals and what you need to know. You'll also boost your vocabulary with a concise Italian culinary glossary.

Keeping courses and food pairings in mind

Anyone embarking on mastering Italian cuisine needs to be able to plan menus, because there is a specific eating pattern that works in terms of flavor, seasonality, and health benefits.

If you're new to Italian cuisine, you may be overwhelmed, not knowing what to serve or when to serve it, but Chapter 2 explains how the courses are set up and ideas to keep in mind as you decide what foods to serve, and Chapter 4 provides the sample menus and inspiration you need to pair the appetizers, sauces, pasta dishes, other first courses with the second courses, side dishes, fruit/nut/cheese platters, and desserts in this book.

Get Cooking! Eyeing Authentic Italian Recipes

When you're ready to cook, Chapters 6 through 20 are where to turn. From appetizers to sauces, pasta, risotto, soups, gnocchi, meat, fish, poultry, and eggs, you learn the genuine Italian approach to all ingredients. Whether you're preparing a fruit and cheese platter, a decadent dessert, a special occasion baked good, bread, pizza, or *focaccia*, you can find a variety of recipes to take you from morning to night, all year long.



REMEMBER

It's no mistake that I saved the recipes for last. Although you may be eager to dive in to cooking, recipes are only one component of Italian cuisine. By taking a bit of time to familiarize yourself with the philosophy behind the food, you'll have a much more meaningful (and fun) time in the kitchen and at the table.

As you embark on your Italian cuisine journey, keep in mind these ideas and traditions:

- » **Take your time, and enjoy the process:** One of the biggest secrets to the Italian kitchen is the pleasure that people take in preparing the food. People actually look forward to making cherished recipes for themselves and their loved ones when they can. A new crop, the arrival of the first berries of spring, or foraging mushrooms in the fall can all be excuses to create something sensational. If you head to the kitchen begrudgingly to cook Italian food, you will never be successful. Preparing true Italian food is work, but it is a labor of love. The first step to being a good cook is adopting this mentality.
- » **Read through the recipe, and adjust if needed (to use more seasonal ingredients, for example); Italian recipes aren't set in stone:** In fact, making the proper substitutions is a typically Italian thing to do!
- » **Gather the kitchen tools and ingredients you need ahead of time to help ensure a relaxed experience:** No one wants to be harried in the kitchen. Traditionally, Italian kitchens weren't set up like design studios; they were functioning laboratories with pots hanging from racks and tools out for easy access (like a restaurant). If your equipment is neatly tucked away, locating it, along with your ingredients, prior to cooking will save time and help you to enjoy the cooking process.
- » **Share your labor of love:** Getting others involved in the cooking process, eating with others, or sharing your creations helps to make the experience more pleasurable, healthful, and worthwhile.