

Where to eat

One of the greatest pleasures of travelling in Italy is discovering the vast variety of delicious food and wines available. Whether a sophisticated trattoria or a simple pizzeria, restaurants rarely serve anything other than Italian specialities and it is not necessary to spend a fortune to find good food. Each drive provides the chance for visitors to sample regional specialities: whether it be the fish and pine-nut delights of Liguria, the black truffles, hams and salamis of Umbria or the classic Mediterranean vegetable and lamb dishes of the south. Below is a basic guide to the typical kinds of eating places you will find in Italy.

Practical Information

Breakfast is usually a croissant (*cornetto*) and coffee taken in a bar. The coffee available comes in a staggering variety of modes from a short, sharp shot (*un caffè*) to long and milky (*latte macchiato*). An espresso diluted with hot water to make it resemble American filter coffee is an *Americano*, and an espresso with a blob of frothy milk is a *caffè macchiato*. In summer, there is usually iced coffee, *caffè freddo*.

The main meal is lunch, normally served in restaurants from noon until 2pm, though in summer resorts most restaurants keep their kitchens open right through to dinner. Dinner is usually served from 8pm to 10:30pm. Most restaurants are closed one day a week and display their *giorno di chiusura* in the window. In holiday resorts, restaurants are normally open between Easter and October. Outside those months, you could easily arrive and find nowhere to eat.

In cities and major towns credit cards are widely accepted, but in smaller places and in the country it is wiser to carry cash. Tax and service

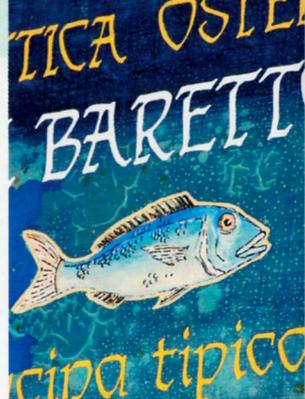
are included in the bill by law, and there is often a small cover charge (*coperto*). Tipping is becoming more common and 10 per cent is usual.

Italians rarely dress down, so dressing reasonably smartly will fit the bill. Only in the most exclusive restaurants is dress formal, and men required to wear a tie and jacket. Children are welcome (and common) in restaurants, even late at night.

Meals begin with an *antipasto*, or starter, followed by the *primo*, or first course, most commonly pasta, risotto or, in winter, a *minestra* (hearty soup). The *secondo* is the meat and fish course, with the *contorno* (vegetables or salad) usually served on a separate dish alongside. Finally there is the *dolce*, or dessert. House wines can vary in quality from region to region. Local wines are always on the menu.

Ristoranti, Trattorias and Osterias

These are the three main terms for a restaurant in Italy, and until some years ago they were quite distinct. A *ristorante* was a "proper" restaurant, with linen tablecloths and waiters in



Above Sign for a Cinque Terre restaurant offering typical seafood cuisine

uniform. A *trattoria* was usually a more basic, homely sort of place: the menu was often scrawled on a blackboard and there were sheets of newsprint to cover the tables and on which to write the bill. *Osterias* were unpretentious country or city hosteleries, offering a few cold cuts and cheese, and maybe a simple pasta dish to accompany a glass of the local wine. However, that has all changed and the choice of name for an establishment these days depends more on the tradition the place identifies with, rather than price, decor or ambience. *Ristorante* is now a neutral, generic term that could apply to anything from a Michelin-starred mecca to a seaside joint where mass-catering is the order of the day. Although there are *trattorias* and *osterias* that have existed for half a century, today the terms can as easily apply to the best restaurant in town: *trattoria* often implies an interest in reviving and reinventing traditional dishes; *osteria* that there is an emphasis on sourcing the very best primary ingredients and wines, as promoted



Left Gelateria in Nemi selling ice cream made with local strawberries Right Caffè degli Spechi on Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia, Trieste



by the **Slow Food movement**, and, often, a rather more minimalist/non interventionist approach to cooking.

Pizzerias

Pizzerias are found throughout the country, and, contrary to popular myth, it is only too easy to find doughy, substandard pizza. You have more chance of striking gold if you go to a pizzeria with a wood-burning oven (*forno a legna*) from which the pizzas should emerge bubbling, scorched and blistered. Pizzerias are almost always informal places, and pizza is usually only served in the evening. The classic accompaniment to pizza is a cold draught beer.

Cafés and Bars

These range from grand cafés with chandelier-lit interiors and terraces fringing some of the most spectacular piazzas in Italy, to modest local bars with zinc counters, steaming coffee machines, football posters and dusty plastic flowers. These unpretentious neighbourhood bars often have standing room only and are places to come for breakfast, a quick toasted sandwich or a swift shot of coffee. Some have a few tables outside for a more leisurely breakfast or apéritif, though you should find time at least

once on your trip to dawdle over a Campari soda and olives in a traditional pavement café watching life pass by.

Picnics

There is no better way of sampling local produce than to plan a picnic. It should not be hard to find a decent delicatessen (*alimentari*) where you can buy delicacies such as rosemary-spiked hams, salamis, cured tuna and swordfish, fresh ricotta, mature gorgonzola, olives, capers and sundried tomatoes, along with a decent bakery (*il forno*), and a greengrocer (*fruttivendolo*) or market (*mercato*) packed with seasonal fruits and vegetables.

Mountain regions often have picnic areas with massive outside grills, a great way of sampling a Chiavenna steak or a freshly caught red mullet. Look out as well for bars advertising a *tavola calda* (literally hot table). Here you can buy hot ready-prepared dishes, which will inevitably include a *pasta al forno* (oven-baked pasta).

Below far left Black truffles at the Sansepolcro market Below left Strawberries for sale at Nemi Below middle Dining in Piazza del Cisterna, San Gimignano Below L'Antica Bottega Food Emporium, Rocca Priora Below right Norcineria (a butcher's shop) in Genzano di Roma

DIRECTORY

RESTAURANT GUIDES AND ASSOCIATIONS

Gambero Rosso
www.gamberorosso.it

L'Espresso
www.espresso.repubblica.it/food

Michelin Guides and Maps
www.michelin.co.uk

Slow Food movement
www.slowfood.it

PRICE CATEGORIES

The following price bands are based on a three-course meal for one, including a half-bottle of house wine, cover charge, tax and service:

inexpensive – under €25
moderate – €25–€45
expensive – over €45

