



THE
COUNTRY COOKING
of ITALY



by COLMAN ANDREWS
foreword by MARIO BATALI

photographs by
HIRSHEIMER AND HAMILTON



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I FRUTTOLA

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for Maddy and Izzy, my partners in pasta since they were bambine



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Finally, but also first and foremost, I owe a whole feast full of gratitude to Christopher Hirsheimer and her colleague Melissa Hamilton. Christopher's delicious and evocative photographs don't just illustrate this volume but bring it to life, and she and Melissa made sense out of some of the most challenging recipes herein and elegantly refined some of the simplest, dispensing plenty of culinary wisdom along the way. This would be half a book, if even that, without them.

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We work on many book projects, but when we work together with the great Colman Andrews it is always such a gratifying collaboration. He shares his breadth of knowledge and authority in such a rich, accessible voice. It was a great honor to photograph this wonderful book and, we thank him for asking us to do it.

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FOREWORD



Colman Andrews's long history as a food writer, editor-in-chief, bon vivant, and inside player in the behind-the-scenes worlds of both food producers and chefs is evidenced by his many magnificent tomes and about a million stories published in glossy monthly foodzines. His legendary and definitive books, *Catalan Cuisine* and *Flavors of the Riviera*, on Catalan and Ligurian cooking, respectively, are cornerstones of my 10,000-volume cookbook collection, and *Ferran*, his sashay into biography, has shaped what the world knows and thinks of the enigmatic and influential chef Ferran Adrià.

But why *The Country Cooking of Italy*—and what the hell does that title mean anyway? With this volume, Andrews has thrown himself into a market crowded with books by various divas, alleged *nonne*, TV stars from the Food Network and PBS, and chefs from *trattorie* and *ristoranti* across the land—many of whom may actually have visited Italy at least a couple of times. In their works, distinct food opinion is often blurred by the prism of commercial marketability, and any real voice or presence is lost.

Not so here. *The Country Cooking of Italy* is not the usual jumble of recipes for “unique” versions of spaghetti alla carbonara, lasagna variations from points outside Bologna, and treatments of saltimbocca ad nauseum. Andrews is keenly aware of the pitfalls of books that offer recipes like these, and he is tired of the dishes that well-intentioned restaurateurs serve their foreign guests throughout the Boot.

It certainly isn't tourist fare—or even the fancy dishes from the tables of Firenze and Roma and Venezia—that make me hungry to cook. I am intrigued and delighted by the inclusion in this book of many recipes, such as Ripiddu Nivicatu, a kind of cuttlefish and ricotta risotto from Catania, that are entirely new to me. Or the odd, simple, and truly delicious Calabrian marinated lettuce dish called Mappina (“dishrag” in the local dialect). It is exactly these kinds of dishes that tempt me into my local grocer and into my kitchen to cook.

Andrews reminds us that genuine cooking from the Italian countryside is not based on exotic proteins or super-rare produce available only on Tuesdays at the market in Lerici, but on daily shopping for seasonal vegetables and on a well-stocked pantry. *These* are the keys to creating food authentic to Lombardy, Sicily, and all the regions in between. Understanding that grain of truth will help you create delicious dishes in your own kitchen in Peoria, Hollywood, or SoHo, whether you cook on an outdated electric stove top or a six-burner modern marvel.

The Country Cooking of Italy succeeds in bringing a fresh cart down a well-traveled path, not only with its selection of unusual, simple, and delicious recipes, but also with the conceit that any American—gastronaut or not—can actually find the required ingredients nearby and cook authentic-tasting Italian dishes at home. Welcome to the real Italy, where great recipes can be found in every corner and good food belongs to everyone.

MARIO BATALI

chef-entrepreneur

ABOUT THE RECIPES

When I signed a contract to write two books in the Country Cooking series, the first on Ireland and then this one on Italy, each with about 250 recipes, more than one person asked me these two questions: How are you going to find that many recipes in Ireland? How are you going to limit yourself to that few in Italy? I have to say that the former was a good deal easier than the latter.

Deciding what was and wasn't "country cooking" was the first challenge. In Italy, at least in principle, the farm is never far away from the table. The best Italian dishes, even the sophisticated kind, tend to derive from simpler fare; and while there are plenty of world-class chefs in Italy today, the most influential and respected cook is always Mamma. Even many distinctly urban specialties have rural roots. One of the most famous of Roman pastas, spaghetti alla carbonara, is said to have been brought into the city by charcoal vendors from the forests of Abruzzo; another, spaghetti all'amatriciana, comes from the agricultural capital of Amatrice in northern Lazio. (I have included the latter in these pages, but not the former, which seems too citified to me, whatever its provenance. On the other hand, risotto alla milanese is clearly a dish of the Lombardian capital (legend has it that it was originally colored not with saffron but with gold leaf supplied by artisans working on mosaics for the Duomo); pizza Margherita was invented in downtown Naples, and nowhere else; risi e bisi (a kind of risotto made with the first spring peas) is as definitive of Venice as the Piazza San Marco. Dishes like these, then, don't appear here. Neither do contemporary variations on traditional cooking even those with rustic inspiration.

Although I have avoided the specialties of Milan, Naples, Venice, and other large cities, I have included plenty of good things from the countryside that surrounds them—and from provincial capitals and smaller towns and villages in every corner of the country. I have also tried to strike a balance between familiar dishes (done right) and more obscure ones. Many recipes in the pages that follow will seem almost ingenuous in their simplicity; only a handful require any measure of culinary dexterity or will take much time. I don't think you will find anything too daunting here, in any case. There are recipes for offal, to be sure, as no book on Italian country cooking could exist without them but nothing too intimidating: no fried blood, no spleen or lungs or spinal marrow. You won't find recipes here for horsemeat or donkey flesh, either, though I do mention them and have enjoyed eating both meats in Italy. As much as possible, I have avoided dishes based on ingredients that aren't readily available in the United States. A few exceptions appear, and in those cases I've suggested substitutes and/or offered mail-order sources.

Where do these recipes come from? Unlike my Irish cookbook, for which I did most of my research in a period of a little under two years—just before writing the manuscript—this one draws on my more than forty years of traveling and eating in its subject country, and nearly as many years of cooking Italian food myself back home. I don't remember where some of these recipes come from, or even where I first tasted the dishes some of them represent. They have been a part of my cooking, and my life, for a long time. Where a recipe in the pages that follow has been given to me by a restaurant or a friend, or has been adapted from a cookbook, I have credited the source. In the other cases, I just have to say that they came, well, from Italy.

In naming dishes, I have used descriptive English titles in most cases, employing Italian terms only when they are either well-known (as with the names of shapes of pasta), awkward to translate (panzanella, caponata), or when the Italian—or, more often, dialect—forms seem particularly attractive or evocative to me (mallorreddus, pepeso, presnitz).

Two final notes: I have never measured olive oil by the tablespoon (or cup or milliliter) in my

life, and I doubt that any Italian country cook ever has, either. Unless I'm baking, I don't believe much in exact measurements. ~~A dish will not be ruined if you add an extra tablespoon or so of grated pecorino, or leave one out.~~ Recipes in Italian cookbooks often include the notation "q.b.," for *quanto basta*—as in "flour q.b."—meaning "when there's enough." That's not very helpful for the inexperienced cook, but the more confident you are in the kitchen, the more useful a notion it is. In testing the recipes, I have used conventional measurements, but in most cases I would advise that you take them as guidelines, not gospel. If the amount of olive oil I have called for in a frying pan, for instance, looks like too much or too little, or the quantity of flour I have specified leaves the dough too dry or too damp, adjust at will.

Also, I have tried to offer the most "authentic" recipes throughout, but in almost every case many versions with equal claims to legitimacy exist. I have chosen those that best reflect my experiences of the dishes in question. I'm sure that some of my knowledgeable friends—not to mention some knowledgeable strangers—will find things to quibble about. All I can answer is that the recipe I offer might not be yours, but it is somebody's.

A NOTE ON INGREDIENTS AND TERMINOLOGY

INGREDIENTS

Butter means unsalted butter. I'm particularly fond of Kerrygold from Ireland, now widely available in supermarkets, which is very rich, with an attractively elastic texture.

Country-style bread means good-quality Italian or French bread sliced from round loaves (not baguettes). The best bread of this kind has a firm but not tough interior and a crust that will crack and flake a bit when cut.

Eggplant/aubergine means the medium-size globe variety (in fact, more ovoid than spherical), not the thinner, elongated Asian types. The latter may be used in recipes where shape is not important however, as long as the quantity is adjusted to match the weight of the globes. I don't find it necessary to salt and drain eggplant before using it, though some cooks disagree.

Eggs are large (about 2 ounces/60 grams each) and should be as fresh as possible. Use organic eggs, if available.

Extra-virgin olive oil is specified throughout, even (in most cases) for deep-frying. You can use a lower grade of olive oil if you like, or even oil of other kinds, but the results won't be as good. I hasten to add that I'm not talking about frying dried fava/broad beans in Tuscan *olio d'oliva* that costs a small fortune a liter. There is plenty of good extra-virgin oil around today for a quarter or a third of the cost, both from Italy (if not necessarily Tuscany) and from Spain, Greece, Tunisia, California, and elsewhere.

Flour means all-purpose/plain white flour unless otherwise specified. Fresh pasta made with water only (not eggs) came out best in my tests when I mixed semolina pasta flour with all-purpose flour, though this type of pasta, almost always dried before using, is typically made with only semolina flour in Italy. (I also use semolina pasta flour for making *scacciata*, a kind of Sicilian stuffed bread.) What about 00 flour? This is a designation, widely used in Italy and on at least one American brand, indicating that the flour is very finely milled, like talc in consistency. It usually also means that the flour has a high protein content (typically 10 to 12½ percent)—though American 00 flour is lower in protein, closer to 8 or 9 percent. (Protein affects the texture of the finished product, whether pasta or baked goods.) There are also slightly different 00 flours sold in Italy for pasta on one hand and pizza on the other. Italian 00 flour is sold in the United States and the United Kingdom, but it's more expensive than domestically milled flour, and I don't think there are noticeable differences in the results it gives.

Fruits and vegetables are medium or standard size and are always washed, trimmed, and peeled as necessary, before using, unless otherwise specified.

Herbs are always fresh, unless otherwise specified. Whole dried bay leaves are the exception.

Parmigiano-reggiano cheese should be just that, or else good-quality grana padano (a parmigiano relative)—not an American, Australian, or Argentinean imitation. It really does make a difference in flavor and texture. Although not specified in the recipes, the cheese should be freshly grated if possible.

Peperoncini are dried chile flakes, reasonably spicy. I find the ones packaged by the big spice companies, the kind you find in supermarket spice racks, generally don't have the requisite kick for southern Italian dishes. Buy Italian flakes if you can find them. Otherwise, use the Mexican variety.

Pasta should be Italian made (unless you're making your own). How much pasta constitutes one serving? That depends on the richness of the sauce, the size of the meal (will the pasta be preceded by antipasto and followed by a main dish?), and, of course, the appetites of the diners. Nonetheless,

recipes that call for 1 pound/500 grams of dried pasta to serve ten or twelve people are ridiculous. ~~Pasta is a course, not a garnish. You will need that much to feed four to six hungry eaters.~~

Pepper should be good-quality coarse-ground black pepper, either packaged or freshly ground, unless otherwise specified.

Salt should be fine-ground sea salt or kosher salt, unless otherwise specified.

Poultry should always be rinsed inside and out and patted dry with paper towels before preparing.

Where the word *prawn* appears in recipes, it is as the British synonym for *shrimp*, and doesn't refer to Dublin Bay prawns—*scampi* in Italian.

Wine should be Italian, if possible. In recipes calling for white wine, don't use overly fragrant varieties (Gewürztraminer, Muscat, or the like) or overly oaked wines. Most Chardonnays are not good for cooking. "Bottle" means a standard 750-milliliter bottle.

Unless otherwise specified, all ingredients should be at room temperature before using.

TERMINOLOGY

The recipes that follow call for various ingredients to be minced, finely chopped, diced, chopped, or coarsely chopped. *Minced* means very finely chopped, into pieces too small to measure. *Finely chopped* means cut into slightly larger irregular pieces $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ inch/6 to 8 millimeters square. *Diced* means about the same size or slightly larger, but cut into cubes as uniform as possible. *Chopped* means cut into irregular pieces 1 to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches/2.5 to 3.75 centimeters square. *Coarsely chopped* means cut into larger irregular pieces, their size not critical.

The cooking vessels most commonly called for are a frying pan, a saucepan, a pot, a Dutch oven, and a baking dish. A frying pan is a large, comparatively shallow pan; I prefer cast iron. My own cast iron pans are old and seasoned enough that they don't react with tomatoes, lemon juice, and other acidic foods; if you are worried about such reactions, which may lend a faint bitterness to food from leached iron, use enameled cast-iron or nonstick pans instead. A saucepan is a small pot of moderate depth, always with a handle and sometimes with a lid. A pot is a deep vessel with a relatively heavy bottom and a lid. (I don't use a pasta pot, which is a pot with a colander set into it, but these are fine for cooking pasta.) A Dutch oven is a heavy, ovenproof pot with a lid. A baking dish is a glass or earthenware cooking vessel, round, square, or rectangular, with or without a lid, ovenproof, and usually but not always usable on the top of the stove (a Spanish *cazuela* or a *tiella*, its southern Italian equivalent, is a good example).

METRIC CONVERSIONS

For the convenience of readers who use metric measurements, quantity, temperature, and length or dimension equivalents have been given in the recipes that follow. Please note that the conversions are approximate, and have been rounded off for reasons of practicality. For instance, 1 pound has been equated to 500 grams, not 454 grams, which would be more accurate; an oven temperature of 400°F becomes 200°C, not the more precise 204°C. Diameter and volume measurements for pots and baking dishes correspond to sizes that are actually available. For example, a 2-quart vessel becomes a 2-liter one, or a 9-inch round baking dish is a 23-centimeter baking dish, rather than a 22.9-centimeter one.

INTRODUCTION

Italian cookery is the cookery of a poor nation, of people who have scant means wherewith to purchase the very inferior materials they must needs work with; and that they produce palatable food at all is, I maintain, a proof that they bring high intelligence to the task.

—The Marchesa di Sant’ Andrea in *The Cook’s Decameron: A Study in Taste Containing Over Two Hundred Recipes for Italian Dishes* by Mrs. W. G. Waters (1901)

As they ate, they spoke of eating, as always happens in Italy.

—Andrea Camilleri, *The Shape of Water*

Many years ago, when my age and my body mass index were both in the low twenties, I went to Europe for the first time, with my slightly older and considerably more worldly English girlfriend. Our plan had been to spend most of the summer on the Dalmatian coast, but as an aspiring filmmaker—I never got any further than the aspiration—I had also been invited to attend a film festival in Trieste, and my Uncle Paul, who worked on travel accounts for an advertising agency, asked me if I’d like to spend the week before that at a hotel on the Venice Lido, for free, while I was at it. I said yes to both, of course.

A week apiece on the Lido and in Trieste is hardly a conventional introduction to Italy. It was in these places, though, that I began to discover both the country and its food. Meals were included in the Lido deal, so we mostly ate at our hotel, rather than in Venice itself. In retrospect, I realize that the food was probably pretty mediocre, but I marveled at the simplicity and purity of what we were offered: slices of bright orange melon with curls of butter-soft prosciutto, pasta tossed with just a few shreds of tomato and some garlic, thin veal steaks or plump fish fillets grilled on a wood fire and then seasoned with nothing more than olive oil and salt. Moving on to Trieste, where we were given meal tickets for the Birreria Forst (a basic trattoria run by a large Italian brewery), I expanded my horizons with unsummery soups full of beans and sauerkraut and intense pasta sauces made with chicken liver or crumbled sausage. I had gone to Italian restaurants all my life, back home in Southern California, but I had never before had food like what I ate in these two weeks.

My experience of Italian food began to grow (as did my waistline, unfortunately) a few years later, when I started spending my vacations with an American friend who had moved to Rome. Sometimes we would go to the market and then she would cook huge meals at home. Mostly, though, we went to restaurants and trattorias around the city, or drove out to the hills of the Castelli Romani or up the coast to Civitavecchia or Ansedonia for lunch. Almost every time I sat down at a table, I was amazed. I loved all the typical Roman specialties—bruschetta, artichokes Roman or Jewish style, spaghetti all’amatriciana or carbonara or cacio e pepe, saltimbocca, stewed oxtail, roast baby lamb—but I also liked it when we went to places serving food from other regions, among them Tuscany, Sardinia, Campania, and Abruzzo. It was in Rome, then, that I also first started to realize that there wasn’t one Italian cuisine, but many.

To understand the impact this kind of eating had on me, you have to remember—or imagine—what things were like in America back then: Italian food typically meant antipasto out of a jar or Caesar salad (invented in the little Italian hill town of Tijuana), spaghetti with meatballs or linguine with clams, “shrimp scampi” or breaded veal smothered in tomato sauce and melted cheese, and maybe spumoni or (in the fancier places) zabaglione for dessert. Unless you came from an Italian family that had maintained strong culinary ties with the old country, or had traveled pretty widely in

Italy yourself with an open mind and an unprejudiced palate, you simply would never have heard of—much less tasted—sun-dried tomatoes, balsamic vinegar, or porcini mushrooms. Radicchio, which now gets tossed into salads at McDonald's, was an obscure and pricey import. My old friend Piero Selvaggio of Valentino restaurant in Santa Monica remembers buying radicchio from Italy for \$75 a crate, including airfreight, and having to throw half of it away when it arrived because it had spoiled en route. When he would put the good leaves into salads and charge a bit more than usual for them, his customers would ask, "What's so special about red cabbage?"

When I first started traveling in France, I realized that real French food was more refined and complex than what I had come to know in the United States; it had been "dumbed down" for American consumption. But Italian food, in a sense, was the other way around: for the most part, Italian cooking in its homeland, I began to figure out on my trips there, was far simpler than the gussied-up Italian American interpretations of it I was used to. It was chicken roasted with garlic and rosemary, not chicken in a wine sauce with sausage, artichoke hearts, onions, and mushrooms. It was fettuccine Alfredo made with just rich butter and parmigiano, not loaded down with cream and ham and peas. American chefs—and for that matter, Italian chefs who come here and quickly learn the American way—don't seem to be able to leave well enough alone. American diners (or so the perception goes) won't pay good money for simple grilled bread with olive oil and garlic, so "bruschetta" comes topped with heirloom beans, artisanal salami, and white truffle oil. You can't charge a premium price for a plate of pasta with plain tomato sauce, so better throw in the peekytoe crab and balsamic-glazed fennel. Half a dozen grilled fresh prawns look naked on a plate, so let's dress them up with some herbs, risotto and green beans with prosciutto. The same chefs who fell in love with Italian cooking in Italy for its simplicity and purity, it appears, no longer trust the virtues that attracted them when they look back from the New World. They don't cook Italian food anymore; they cook a version of Italian, inspired by the original but (they believe) improved. Somewhere along the way, of course, the inspiration fades away and the remains of an ancient cuisine, vivid and vital, get tossed into the melting pot. Back in the 1970s, my friend Bill Stern—who had lived in Rome and had much the same reaction to the food there as I did—wrote a magazine article called "There Are No Italian Restaurants in America." This was perhaps hyperbole, but I knew what he meant.

The next stage in what I hope is not too corny to call my love affair with Italian food developed slowly in the 1980s and 1990s, as I broke free of Rome's seductive magnetism and began traveling and eating in other parts of the country. I spent long spells in Tuscany, Umbria, Emilia-Romagna, the Catalan end of Sardinia, the wine country of Friuli and the Alto Adige, and the wine and truffle country of Piedmont. I practically lived in Liguria for a year and a half, researching a book (published as *Flavors of the Riviera: Discovering Real Mediterranean Cooking*). Later, I went south, into Molise, Puglia, Basilicata, and Sicily, and eventually managed to visit every one of the country's twenty regions, however briefly in some cases. As my Italian improved (from nonexistent to pretty shaky, where it remains today), I went beyond restaurants and began to meet and talk—and above all, eat and drink—with farmers and winemakers and shopkeepers and just plain food-loving citizens. And I learned that what I thought I knew about Italian food from my restaurant experiences in Venice, Trieste, and Rome was only part of the story.

I learned that many of the most famous "real Italian" dishes I had encountered, even in Italy, were twentieth-century creations—and that even so definitive a food as pasta was not a daily part of the Italian diet until about a hundred years ago. People ate polenta or bread, and invented scores of ways to use the latter when it became too hard to eat alone. A few basic vegetables—onions, garlic, carrots, celery, fava/broad beans, and later tomatoes, shell beans, and potatoes—were the staples. Protein came from anchovies and sardines, sometimes dried or salted cod, occasionally bits of ham or sausage. The preferred cooking fat in some areas was neither butter nor olive oil but lard. Butter and

oil were too expensive, and even those who grew olives and made their own oil often sold it for a profit instead of using it themselves. Until the last few generations, fresh fish was all but unknown unless you lived on the coast, fresh meat was a rarity, and chicken was for a holiday feast for most Italians. When I was researching my book in Liguria, I talked to old-timers in the *entroterra* (backcountry) who as children had lived on little more than dried cod, chestnuts, and wild greens. The romanticized “Mediterranean diet” touted in the latter part of the twentieth century was, I realized—I wrote in *Flavors of the Riviera*—“more the way people eat at Chez Panisse than the way they eat, and have traditionally eaten, around the Mediterranean.”

None of these realizations made me love Italian food any less. In fact, they made me look at it with greater admiration, and, I think, to understand its underpinnings better. Italian food—a lot of it, anyway—grew out of poverty, but it also grew out of fundamental respect for the land and what it yielded. At its best, like all cuisines with modest beginnings, it respects the seasons, wastes nothing, values consistency and simplicity; and it belongs to a place. Over the years, I have been particularly impressed, as I’ve made Italian friends from one end of the peninsula to the other, at the intensity of local and regional pride that so many Italians, even the young upwardly mobile ones with their iPhones and VWs, maintain in the food products and dishes they grew up with. They love eating—is an accident that in the language of their predecessors, the Romans, the words for “eat” (*edo*) and “be” (*sum*) share an infinitive form, *esse?* (Edo ergo sum?)—and they love talking about eating. They love telling you about the cheese made just outside town, the salami that their uncle cures each year, the olive oil from down the road so good that Tuscans come and buy it to resell as their own. They love talking about the “unique” pasta shapes found only in their town (which are probably found in lots of other towns, too, if sometimes under different names, but never mind). And they love talking about everybody’s favorite cook, Mamma, and what she puts on the table, or used to before she passed on to her much-deserved reward—the food against which all other must be judged.

In introducing my last cookbook, *The Country Cooking of Ireland*, I proposed that, in a sense, Irish cooking was country cooking. I cannot make the same case for Italy. Too many culinary innovations over the centuries can be traced to the legendary gourmards of ancient Rome, to Renaissance noblemen and prelates or their chefs, to wealthy urban merchants. But I do think that all Italian cooking is in some sense *from* the country, from the region, from the land. This is the key to its identity. This is what makes it great.

Geonet



Olive harvest on the Melfi family farm, Casacalenda, Campobasso (Molise), 1932.



ANTIPASTO



AWAKENING THE PALATE

In [a] sense the antipasto . . . is shop-bought food, and it was used by the cleverest hosts to fill out the duller phases of the meal.

—*Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari, Italian Cuisine: A Cultural History*

Among Italian *antipasti* (hors d'oeuvre) are to be found some of the most successful achievements in European cooking.

—*Elizabeth David, Italian Food*

Jeopardy!, the following clue was given: “It means appetize and is often served before the show, the correct answer (phrased as a question, ‘What is antipasto?’) Wrong. As I pointed out in a letter to the show’s producer, *antipasta* and *pasto* are etymologically unrelated. The former means ‘before’ and comes from a Greek word, also *pasta*, meaning a kind of salted porridge (‘sprinkle’ (*pastry* and *paste* derive ultimately from the same root). The latter, ‘dinner,’ related to the Latin *repastus*, which has its origin in *pascere*, ‘to pasture.’ Antipasto is thus something served before the meal, not necessarily before the show. I got back a rather snippy response, informing me that the show’s producers were doing painstaking research. I never returned to *Jeopardy!* again.

In any case, antipasto first became part of the Italian eating experience in the sixteenth century, long before the date of the invention of pasta did. The idea was to stimulate the appetite through small, salty, simple flavors, which usually meant pickled vegetables, cured meats, and brined or oil-packed seafood (that is, antipasto was frequently “shop bought”). The great cured meat products of Italy—the hams, salamis, and so on—were particularly useful in this context.

At the Italian restaurants I knew growing up in Southern California, antipasto was usually a small plateful of pickled vegetables, often fished out of an immense glass urn, possibly garnished with some cubes of salami and maybe some strips of provolone. I remember how amazed and delighted I was, then, when I first walked into *Castello*, an ancient country inn on the Via Appia, on the edge of Rome. Just inside the door, I came upon a breathtaking example of what antipasto could be: a long, two-tiered self-service table was crowded with platters and bowls and well-used baking dishes full of the most wonderful-looking foods—marinated onion rings, three kinds of meat-and-rice-stuffed vegetables (eggplants, tomatoes, and bell peppers/capsicums), lentil salad, butter beans in olive oil, borlotti (cranberry) beans in olive oil, fresh ricotta and mozzarella (both glistening with olive oil and sprinkled with black pepper), marinated anchovies, tuna in olive oil, seafood salad, grilled squid, grilled zucchini/eggplant, grilled radicchio, marinated beets/beetroot, frittatas flecked with spinach and chard, thin slices of hard sausage in several varieties, three or four kinds of olives, and on and on. There must have been forty things to choose from; I think I chose them all.

Of course, most antipasto selections in Italy today aren’t this elaborate. In the mid-twentieth century, the array of cold antipasti began to go out of style in many places. Gourmets criticized it for dulling the palate, rather than stimulating it; one Milanese writer called the practice of eating antipasto “absolutely boring.” Today, many places offer just a few kinds of stuffed or marinated vegetables, some olives, maybe some local salami or the equivalent. Or, there might be a few slices of prosciutto, some squash blossoms, some form of melted cheese. That’s fine. A huge part of the pleasure of antipasto is just to start the culinary conversation.

DEEP-FRIED OLIVES

SERVES 6 TO 8

Deep-fried olives, served in the bars of Venice and the rest of the Veneto, are often called Venetian tapas. But I’ve also had them in Tuscany and in Puglia, and those of Abruzzo I heard in the Marche are particularly famous. This is a simple version, without filling.

¾ CUP/45 GRAMS TOASTED BREAD CRUMBS, HOMEMADE (PAGE 378) OR COMMERCIAL
SALT AND PEPPER

¼ TEASPOON PAPRIKA
¼ TEASPOON DRIED OREGANO OR MARJORAM 2 EGG WHITES
50 MEDIUM-SIZE PITTED GREEN ITALIAN OR SPANISH OLIVES
4 CUPS/1 LITER OLIVE OIL

Put the bread crumbs into a wide, shallow bowl. Season them generously with salt and pepper, and add the paprika and oregano. Mix together well with a fork. Lightly beat the egg whites in a small bowl.

Select a baking sheet/tray large enough to hold the olives in a single layer without touching, and line with waxed/greaseproof paper or parchment/baking paper. One at a time, dip the olives into the egg whites, roll them in the seasoned bread crumbs, and place them on the lined baking sheet. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.

Heat the oil in a deep fryer or a deep saucepan fitted with a frying basket to 375°F/190°C. Working in batches, add the olives and fry until golden brown, about 3 minutes. As they are done, drain them on paper towels. Serve warm.

FRIED SQUASH BLOSSOMS



SERVES 6

Fried squash blossoms, either plain or stuffed with mozzarella and sometimes anchovies, are eaten anywhere in Italy that zucchini/courgettes or other summer squash will grow—which is almost everywhere. I got this recipe many years ago from a friend in Liguria.

1½ CUPS/185 GRAMS FLOUR
SALT
1 TABLESPOON EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL
1 EGG, LIGHTLY BEATEN
2 TO 3 CUPS/480 TO 720 MILLILITERS CANOLA OIL
1 GARLIC CLOVE, MINCED
2 TABLESPOONS MINCED ITALIAN PARSLEY
36 SMALL- TO MEDIUM-SIZE SQUASH BLOSSOMS, STEMS AND STAMENS REMOVED, THEN RINSED AND DRIED
INSIDE AND OUT

Sift together the flour and 1 teaspoon salt into a medium bowl. Whisk in 2 cups/480 milliliters warm water, the olive oil, and the egg. Set the batter aside.

Pour the canola oil into a large frying pan to a depth of about 1 inch/2.5 centimeters and heat over high heat to 375°F/190°C. Stir the garlic and parsley into the batter. Working in batches, dip the blossoms into the batter, allowing the excess batter to drip back into bowl, and add to the hot oil. Fry the blossoms, turning once if necessary to cook evenly, until golden brown, 2 to 3 minutes. As they are done, drain them on paper towels.

Sprinkle the fried blossoms with salt while they are still slightly moist, then serve hot or at room temperature.

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