

Untold Italy Episode 117 - Porchetta, Pasta, and Panzanella - Dishes from Umbria

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 117.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy

Ciao a tutti and welcome to another delicious episode of Untold Italy. All about porchetta, pasta, panzanella and more! This time we're headed to Italy's green heart - beautiful Umbria - where you'll find beautiful green pastures, hills topped with ancient villages, and important Medieval cities. Our guest today - Letizia Mattiacci is a cookbook author who runs a cooking school in the region and she's here to share with you the bounty of the region, its dishes, and their importance to the local communities.

You'll learn why Umbria is a great place to visit for foodies, history and nature lovers and what dishes to order when you get there. So, Andiamo!, let's get started.

Katy

Benvenuta Letizia, welcome to the Untold Italy podcast.

Letizia

Grazie Katy. It's really nice to be here with you. Thank you for having me today.

Katy

Oh, I'm so happy to have you here speaking to us from such a beautiful part of the world. Now Letizia before we get started, can you please describe to me the view you can see from your window? Because I saw it the other day, and I'd love our listeners to hear what it's like.

Letizia

It's a beautiful early spring day today in Umbria in central Italy, where I'm located near Assisi, a very old, ancient medieval town. And what I can see from my window is the beautiful hills of Umbria, like an amphitheater of hills. And then I see the Basilica of San Francis of Assisi,

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

which is marvelous UNESCO heritage monument. And I see the fortress of Assisi and my olive grove. So it's really a marvelous day to look outside from our hill today.

Katy

Beautiful. It's such a beautiful, peaceful part of the world. I like to call it serene because it's not so busy. It's a lovely, quiet area, Umbria, and it's got all these stunning cities and towns, and it's just a really special part of the world. And what brought you here? What brought you to this beautiful scene overlooking Assisi?

Letizia

Yeah, it's a long story. I'm born and raised in Umbria in Perugia, which is Umbria's main town, let's call it provincial capital. And I studied there. I'm an entomologist as a training means. I studied insects for quite a few years, and I lived in quite a few countries while I was studying insects, I lived in the United States, I lived in the Netherlands, by the way. I'm married to a Dutch man. And then I moved to Austria, where I worked for the International Atomic Energy Agency. And I worked on Tsetse flies. So I also spent some time in Zimbabwe running after Tsetse flies, which was quite adventurous and exciting and dangerous, too, because they were lions together in the Savanna together with the Tsetse flies, and then Switzerland. By then, my husband and I decided that it was all very great and very glamorous, but we were tired to change countries every few years, and we decided to change our lives. And we moved back to the Umbrian countryside. And we found this big farmhouse on a snow day on Boxing Day of 1996. And we fell in love with the view because the view is really marvelous and special, even in Umbria. And bought it and took five years, five years of working in Switzerland to restore it. And then we came back and we started Alla Madonna del Piatto, which is our aggriturismo and cooking school near Assisi.

Katy

Amazing, but taking five years to restore a house. I think that's pretty average, but it must have been a lot of hard work. Was it?

Letizia

It was. The thing is, it's difficult, of course, to do these sorts of projects when you're working. The actual work, they probably took one to one and a half years. Parts of this house are really old, like 14/15 hundred. It's a stone house with very delicate walls. They need a lot of reinforcing and with wooden beams on the ceiling so that we had to redo most of the wooden ceilings. But obviously, because we're in Italy, the biggest problem was the bureaucracy. So we took a lot of time for the bureaucracy. But then by then, we were able to come back here, have our baby, our first and only baby there, and then finish to renovate the house by ourselves. So my husband (also an entomologist), he can do a bit of everything. And so we spent one whole year working in the house. And then in 2002, we had our first few guests. So actually, we're celebrating 20 years of our agriturismo.

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

Katy

Congratulations. That's amazing. Wow.

Letizia

Thank you.

Katy

And what sparked the passion in food? Why did you want to start a cooking school?

Letizia

Well, if you are Italian and you travel the world, only then you realize how beloved is the Italian cuisine. And you realize you always have a credit because people ask your recipes all the time. It's like, how do you do a proper carbonara or how do you do proper lasagna? Oh, this is tiramisu. When I moved to the Netherlands in 93, the tiramisu was an absolute novelty. And there was a Christmas in which it was not possible to find lady fingers. They were all finished because the tiramisu fashion arrived. So everybody wanted recipe. And we always loved to invite people for dinner. And just I realized that one of the best parts was to show them how to cook and to cook together. And so we have done this in all the countries we have lived. We did some field work in Tanzania. My husband used to work on malaria mosquitoes for a while. And I remember being in this experimental station in Tanzania with everybody around the table with spaghetti, which we have found it was almost a miracle to find spaghetti in the sticks of Tanzania. It was just so wonderful to cook together. And so our agriturismo has a bed and breakfast part, and it has a vacation rental. It's very small, very homey. Doesn't look like a hotel at all. And then we decided to show people how to cook home food. At that time, so this was the early 2000. Most of the cooking schools were quite fancy and complicated and sophisticated. And we decided that to show what's unsophisticated and very natural food of every day. And we just thought, if it doesn't work, we will stop. What's the big deal? But it actually worked very well. And we've had people from all over the world for all these 20 years. So it's been a wonderful experience.

Katy

It really has and you've also written a couple of cookbooks, too, haven't you?

Letizia

Yes. So I love to write. So I've been writing my blog, Alla Madonna del Piatto, since 2009. And my husband is an excellent photographer. And so we spent a lot of time building up these books that came partially from the cooking classes, partially from the blog or both. And my books have always been a collaborative effort because I'm Italian. Writing a book in English, especially my first book, A Kitchen With a View, was quite scary because one thing is to write

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

a blog - you can be sort of funny Italian in the blog, and everybody forgives you, but you want to write a really proper book. But we have so many friends. There have been so many people staying with us over the years, and we just asked them to help with the language, with the form. Also, because a lot of our guests are from the United States, we wanted to have the recipes - we brought grams and liters and kilograms. And also I call the 'hellish' cups and teaspoons because one can convert, but they never work very well. And let's face it, they're just not precise enough. But my second book, *Fest Italiana*, was even more interesting because by then, the social media picked up so much. So what I did, I put up the recipes for testing on the social media. In *Fest Italiana*. I wanted to talk about how Italians celebrate life throughout the year. We were in lockdown, and we were all very sad and very insecure. And I thought, I want something that will make people happy. And so it's not like the feast only of Christmas and Easter, but there's many celebrations and many ways to gather and celebrate in the Italian culture, like in every other culture. And so I would put up recipes on Facebook. And when I put up the *cacio e pepe*, it's considered a Roman dish. But of course, everybody eats pasta with pecorino cheese and pepper in central Italy as a tradition. I had 50 testers.

Katy

Wow.

Letizia

It was incredible. It was incredible. So it was so fun to interact with people. And there were people telling me, oh, my cheese clogged in an awful ugly ball, what shall I do? Because that's what happens with *cacio e pepe*. And it's just at the end, I think I have a recipe. I kind of call it a perfect recipe, but a recipe that works for a lot of people. And it was magnificent.

Katy

It sounds amazing. So without a doubt, you're so passionate about food and sharing your cooking with people from all over the world. But let's hear a little bit about the food culture in Umbria. How does it differ from other parts of Italy?

Letizia

That is always a great question, because, of course, as you know, having visited Italy, you can't really say there's Italian food, there's cliches - everybody thinks we always eat every day pizza, pasta and tiramisu and that's, of course, not the way we eat. But there are very deep and very ancient traditions. And you also have to consider that Italy, of course, has become one country legally only in 1860. So many areas of Italy have developed quite independently from each other, including the cuisine, especially the cuisine of the simpler people, because, of course, the nobility had their cooks which in certain periods were from France. In certain period were from Italy, obviously, in certain period were from Russia. I mean, there have been different periods for every cuisine. From Spain. But the normal people eat what's available locally. So what do we have in Umbria? In Umbria, we have a relatively cold for Italy, standard

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

cold winter. And we have very hilly terrain. So what we eat traditionally is grains, of course, especially ancient grains, like, for example, farro, which is something that has been cultivated since the times of the Romans. And then we have some extraordinary legumes, like especially the lentils, because, again, these are crops that work quite well in the Apennine areas where you have high altitude.

Letizia

So the lentils, especially the lentils from Castelluccio di Norcia, are famous among the cooks of the world because they are very tiny lentils. They cook quite quickly for 15 to 20 minutes, very flavorful, not starchy at all. So, in fact, if you cook them with a little bit of aromatics and just to put some good olive oil on it, you have a marvelous dish without doing anything. One cannot almost get through the description of cuisine of a place in Italy if you don't talk about olive oil. The Umbrian olive oil is also known to connoisseurs all over the world. We have various denomination areas in which there are very specific varieties that give very specific flavor and aroma to the oil. So our oil is that classic peppery, grassy, green aromatic oil that you use to drizzle on almost everything. We always enumerate is very normal. You have a bottle on the table when the food is served, you drizzle a little bit of olive oil, and it's really excellent and it's really fresh and it's fabulous. If you come in the Fall, in October, when there is olive harvest, you can go to the meals and try the oil, which is really great. And there's more. Of course, we have truffle. So we're in the mountains, we have truffle, black truffle, white truffle. We have pecorino cheese and a variety of peasant dishes that belong to our tradition.

Katy

It sounds like it's a very rustic and simple style of cooking, but I do know that it's very delicious. So shall we hear about some of the dishes that we can try when we go to Umbria? Because listeners, I have seen this list, and I'd already have my dinner, and I read it and I started feeling hungry straight away. Should we talk about some of the bread that we can find in Umbria, Letizia?

Letizia

Absolutely. So in Umbria, we have a few special breads. And I like to talk today about both the Torta al Testo and the Torta di Pasqua. Now, note the term torta, in Italy, torta doesn't necessarily mean a tart. So a sweet dish, but it can be something baked and it can be a flat bread like the Torta al Testo, or leavened bread like a Torta di Pasqua. So basically it can be something that it can be enriched with sugar and eggs or just with several ingredients. So these two breads are very different in use. The Torta al Testo is basically a flat bread, not dissimilar to Piadina/to a Mexican tortilla in the sense that is scooped on a cast iron disc, but it's thicker. So it's probably four times as thick as a Mexican tortilla, say wheat tortilla. And Umbrians are very fond of it because this is one of the foods that all the farmers made, because the Umbrian farmers were quite poor and they had to work in the fields and they didn't have time to make bread every day. So this was a sort of quick bread. So in the past,

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

the farmers would have it probably with vegetables, maybe a little bit of pecorino. But nowadays we have it with prosciutto. In Umbria, we also have very good pork. And the Umbrian prosciutto is also delicious, well- aged, prosciutto and also a classical thing that you find at every garden, party in the summer, the *orta al Testo* cut open and then filled with grilled sausages and, for example, cooked spinach or other steamed vegetables. So the *Torta di Pasqua* is a completely different exercise. It's a very complicated cheese bread that is leavened. Several times and that the family make often as a communal project. You have to consider that in the past - so this was done for Easter. It's called the *Torta di Pasqua* because *Pasqua* is Easter. And this was done by the family that would put away the eggs for a while. It's a big, thick bread that is consumed for breakfast on Easter day again, together with a good plate of *chacuterie*, for example, prosciutto or salami.

Katy

Delicious. I do love the fact that in Italy, it's not just like dishes, main dishes or pastas that change from region to region, but also the bread because, you know, in neighboring Tuscany, their bread isn't very nice. I don't like it anyway. They don't put salt in it for some reason. So it's a very I mean, it goes well with some of the other things that they put with it. But if you have it on its own, if you get it in a basket, the Tuscan bread just sort of go, don't you? But Umbrian bread is absolutely delicious.

Letizia

Yeah, I would say you have to know where you try it, because often if you go to a simple restaurant, the bread is not that interesting. And so you have probably to go to a better bakery and find the proper bread. We also have saltless bread, but that bread is a specific function of being like an edible spoon. You put your prosciutto on it, you do your bruschetta on it and you add salt to it. So it depends what you do with it. If you eat it with something like pecorino, a truffle spread, some prosciutto, some salami and already there's salt. So the bread doesn't have salt. If you do something else like a bruschetta, you add the salt. Yeah. So it's really a variety of bread that has a specific use.

Katy

Exactly. But I mean, I love bread. I know some people are really sweet people, and I do like sweets as well. But if I had to choose, I would always just choose bread because it can be so varied and delicious in so many different ways.

Letizia

I do understand.

Katy

So apart from bread, let's talk about the pasta as well, because you've got some really different pasta dishes that people may not have heard of as well.

Letizia

Yeah. Today I wanted to present the string Stringozzi because nobody knows them. So Stringozzi is a very rustic pasta. It's basically like simple noodles that you can also roll by hand. And they are similar to the Tuscan Pici. It's pasta that is made with very little egg or no egg. So they are like spaghetti, but softer. And they really work so well with so many recipes. So they're very easy to make. I make them all the time at the cooking classes because people are surprised that they can make fresh pasta so quickly. And one of the recipes I like because it's also a sort of tradition that has evolved with the local ingredients is the truffle carbonara. So basically I use the Stringozzi - so once you make the fresh Stringozzi, they only cook in 1 minute, and then I make a carbonara with the proper ingredients. So what is in a carbonara? There's bacon, but there is a specific bacon, which we call Guanciale in Italy. Cured pork cheek. It's not Pancetta. Guanciale has a much better texture and flavor to flavor the carbonara. And then there's pecorino cheese. So on this I make a little concession because I find that some pecorino is very salty, so you might want to use a little bit less. And once the carbonara is assembled, obviously without cooking the egg too much, then it's absolutely beautiful with the Stringozzi carbonara with a little bit of shaved truffle on top. But of course, since not in every country you can maybe buy fresh truffle, a good quality truffle paste. A teaspoon per person of truffle paste is also very nice. It's a recipe that you find in Trattoria in Umbria.

Katy

I've never heard of truffle carbonara before, but I'm going to be searching that out. And can you get it all year round?

Letizia

That's a good question. The carbonara, you could, but the truffle has seasons. So if a restaurant is proper fresh truffle, most of the truffle is available from October to January. And then there is some more delicate truffle. So the summer truffle that comes from June to well, they say September. But of course, if July, August is very dry, then you don't have much of that. So more as a winter dish, and also because it's pretty rich, I think it's indicated as a winter dish.

Katy

Now, what about? That's our primi? What about our secondi, which is obviously like our main dish. So I think when a lot of people think of the main dishes in Italy, they think of like the Tuscan Bistecca alla fiorentina, and maybe to the coast, you have fish dishes. What can we find in Umbria?

Letizia

Okay, so I'm going to talk about chicken, Hunter style chicken or Pollo alla Cacciatore, as we say in Italiano, or cacciatore chicken. This is my mother's recipe that has no tomato, because Umbria is not a tomato place. Of course, we use plenty of tomato, but until probably the 50 or the 60s, there was not much tomato grown in Umbria. And they're still not because, of course, it's a cooler climate. What's interesting about this recipe? So it's a recipe by which the chicken is braised with onion and garlic, juniper berries, sage, rosemary, wild fennel. You can use fennel seeds if you don't have it, capers and olives. So it's a marvelous aromatic dish that would work with any chicken. But obviously a good organic chicken works very well. And there's also quite a bit of white wine. However, this recipe is not a recipe for chicken because the Umbrian traditional didn't kill the chicken, because the chicken was used by the farmer to produce eggs and sell them at the market. But it would be used for game. So guinea fowls, pheasant and other small animals that were hunted in the past. And you can still find a great delicacy in the better restaurant. Pigeon, for example, in Umbria, you find often pigeon. And I advise people if they like duck, they should absolutely try pigeon, which is even more juicy than dark and very flavorful. Another recipe I presented today is the Turkey porchetta style. Now, if you come to Umbria, you will find many dishes porchetta style. Let's explain what porchetta, of course. So porchetta is a whole roasted pig. You can see that the Umbrians are quite carnivores in recent times. So the pig is very important in the Umbrian diet. You can't get an Umbrian to diet from pig because that's just not something that I understand. The porchetta is a whole, roasted pig that is sold in the streets in small stands along the street, as a street food. And again, it has all the classic aromatics of the region. So it has rosemary, it has wild fennel, and it's slow roasted. It has these wonderful cracklings around. And you generally eat it, for example, with the hot Torta al Testa. So that little bit of fat melts, you know. It just makes the most amazing panino to have on the way. But if you don't have the time and the space to roast a whole pig, you can roast a smaller part of the pig.

Letizia

But you can also take like a Turkey leg and have it deboned and then fill it up with this mixture of herbs and a little bit of guanciale or pancetta, so that the guanciale and the herbs melt inside the Turkey leg while you roast it slowly in the oven. And it's a marvelous dish to have for a party with people.

Katy

So you don't just save that one for Christmas or...

Letizia

No, the whole year. The whole year. You can have something that is made in the porchetta style. Yeah. So of course, if you do the leg, it's like for a family of four or five people, it's the perfect amount of meat. So it's easy to make.

Katy

Amazing. Well, I've been in Rome and they try and do that porchetta down in the markets there. But I think the best one I've ever had was in Orvieto and like the Umbrian style porchetta. And I can imagine smaller towns that you go to, you can find some absolutely incredible porchetta. Is there a favorite place that you like to go to for porchetta?

Letizia

So we have a guy in the market of a village nearby in Bastia Umbra - he gets there in the evening around six, and every evening he sells a whole pig. And the best is to get there at seven when you get the central piece, which has the right balance of crackling and fat and lean meat. It's just amazing. And then you bring it home for dinner and you serve it with a little bit of salad and vegetables and then a bit of bread, if you like, and it makes a great dinner.

Katy

That sounds amazing. I do like the sound of the chicken cacciatore as well, because I really love olives and capers. Like anything with olives and capers. I just devour because I do like that combination of flavors. It's really tasty, especially with the white wine and the chicken. I'm going to make that because normally we make the chicken cacciatore with tomatoes but I think I would like to try your recipe with sounds delicious.

Letizia

Thank you. And don't forget, I didn't say it before, but don't forget to finish it with a little lemon peel and a little lemon juice or balsamic vinegar, because that little bit of sour offsets the sweetness of the chicken.

Katy

Well, everyone, needless to say, we will be sharing the recipes that Letizia has told us all about because you'll definitely want to go and try them yourselves. I know I do. Now, what about what do we sort of eat with our main dishes? Is there a particular salad that you like?

Letizia

Yes. So we eat generally a lot of steamed vegetables of the season. So it can be broccoli, it can be spinach, it can be swiss chard. And we always cook it a very simple way. That means blanch it or steam it and then just saute with a little bit of garlic and if you like, without burning the garlic, that's very important. Just the aroma you need of the garlic in the olive oil, and you can have a pinch of fennel seeds. So this is a classic second course. But because finally, summer will be coming. We also love the panzanella salad. So panzanella is a bit of a misunderstood term because it's used for any bread salad. But in Italy Panzarella is not just a

generic bread salad, but it's a salad made with tomato, onion. Then there is one crunch ingredient, which can be a bit of celery, can be a bit of cucumber. There's no meat, olives, mozzarella, nothing else except some bread, which possibly should be nice crusty bread, which has become stale. And then you dip it quickly in water and break it into pieces. Or you can have bread that you have air dried in the oven and you have tossed it, but it shouldn't be soft bread. Otherwise, when you mix it with the juices of the tomato, you really want nice ripe tomatoes. And when you mix it with the juice, it becomes soupy. While if the bread is broken and a little bit wet, it will suck in the juices of the tomatoes. So you can also use it when it's very hot. You just have panzanella as a meal.

Katy

So delicious. I love it. The bread soaks up the juices, and it's such a little flavor bomb in your mouth. You're like 'wow'. So simple, yet so delicious. I love it so much. I can't wait to come to Umbria - it's not long now, but we have to sort of restrict my eating until then, I think porchetta and panzanella will be delicious! And save room for dessert.

Letizia

Okay, so we have very many very simple desserts. You have to consider that the majority of the baked desserts in Umbria are originated from bread. So generally they were bread dough, which was sweetened and enriched with other ingredients. However, nowadays many are also just made as normal cakes and cookies. So I would like to present the Ciaramicola. Ciaramicola I translated it in English. Fiance cake or love cake. There's a marvelous romantic story because this is a cake that is made so it's like a ring cake. And the dough is made with a special liquor that you find in Italy (it's a bit difficult to find outside Italy), which is called Alkermes. Alkermes is a liquor that was made already in the middle age with all sorts of strange ingredients. Ambergris, pearls, gold leaf, all sorts of weird ingredients because it was considered a super special thing. And it was colored with the shell of tiny insects, which were bright red. Okay, modern liquor is not made like this. So you find it in every shop in Umbria and in central Italy in general. It has a lot of spices. It has cloves, cardamon, rose water, vanilla, cinnamon. So basically, it's made on a mixture of sweet spices. It has red food coloring. As a result, when you make the cake, the inside of the cake is bright pink, almost red, and then signifies the heart love. And then outside it has a lemon meringue placed that signifies purity. And this was given as a love gift for Easter. The girl would make it for her boyfriend for Easter week, she said, as a symbol of love.

Letizia

Now much, more less romantic, but absolutely as good are the Ciambelline cookies. So Ciambelline means again, ring cookies. And again, why ring? Because since it derives from bread dough, it's much easier to cook something sweet with a hole in the middle because it cooks better. If you have vegan friends. This is the ideal dessert because it's mixed only with olive oil and wine. And then it has any seed and fennel seed and flour, obviously, and sugar. And then it's rolled in sugar. So it has a very light sugar crust. And these are the classic

cookies that you find in all the wineries in Umbria. So when you go to taste our local wines, like the Sagrantino, for example, you dip these specific cookies in wine, and they are absolutely fantastic.

Katy

Wait, you dip the cookies in the wine?

Letizia

Wine, yes. We don't dip cookies in coffee because we drink espresso. It's too small to dip cookies. We dip cookies in wine in Umbria.

Katy

I didn't realize that. That's amazing.

Letizia

That's a new thing for you to do, Katy. Start to dip the cookies in wine.

Katy

Can you find those all year round? Because you can only find the fiance cake at Easter.

Letizia

I would say this is more typical from Perugia, the Ciaramicola. So from our main town. And in Perugia, you will find it often all year round in some other parts of Umbria, you might find it or not, depending. And many people make it at home. This is very popular to make it home.

Katy

And so does Umbria have this tradition of Pastisceria as well, like they have in other regions? Or is it mainly more simple?

Letizia

It's very simple. It's very simple because you have to consider that we never had a court. So in Umbria. So Umbria has been part of the Kingdom of the Pope for many centuries. And basically after the Renaissance, there weren't any course to speak of that would bring the cuisine at such a sophisticated level to have the patisserie that you have in Sicily or that you have in Piemonte, for example, or in Naples. So very rustic, very rustic, simple things, not a lot of sugar. And this is one of the reasons why you also want the wine with it, because often the desserts are quite dry.

Katy

It's really interesting, as you've been talking, what I can see here, apart from the pasta, obviously, and the bread, there is quite a lot of options if you can't eat gluten. And you mentioned the lentils before, if you're vegetarian, it sounds like there's a really nice balance of dishes and foods there for people who've got all different types of eating requirements.

Letizia

Absolutely. Polenta, for example, which is made with corn, obviously, it's also a very popular dish. Unfortunately, I have to eat no wheat and I never have problems going to a restaurant. I always find something that has no wheat in it. And polenta is a classic. And you always find vegetable side dishes that are out of the menu. In a proper Trattoria, they will just write vegetable of the day because it depends on what they find in the market. So within a couple of weeks, there will be a lot of artichokes, a lot of asparagus that shouldn't be just spinach. So one should always ask if you want more vegetables and a lot of beans. So not only lentils but also all sorts of other beans.

Katy

Amazing. Yeah. I think that's one thing that's really kind of like a misconception about Italian food that is very heavily meat and sort of pasta and pizza base. But it's not you can see so much variety that you can try, especially from region to region and even within the region, too, right?

Letizia

Absolutely. And even the pasta sauce. You have sauces, which by now everybody eats them in the country. But you also have a lot of sauces that are based on seasonal ingredients and you only find them at a certain time of the year. For example, pasta with fresh fava bean. That's also upcoming within the next month, and then it disappears.

Katy

You have to be quick. You have to be quick or you have to just visit all the time.

Letizia

Exactly. Yeah, that's a good idea.

Katy

In, Umbria, is there a particular area or region that's really well known for its amazing food, or is it just everywhere it's got their own special? I mean, you mentioned the porchetta guy, which I'm going to seek him out. I hope he's there when I'm there in June.

Letizia

Yeah. Lungi. Lungi in Bastia Umbra. Well, what I tell people is that the real food is found in the countryside. So there's a variety of small villages where you have way better food than obviously in the very center of a more touristy place. I mean, if you go in the center of Assisi, Assisi has been a pilgrimage place for 700 years, it's absolutely gorgeous and you have a couple of really nice restaurants. But if you want extraordinary, you have a little to go a little bit out in the hills, ask the locals and say what's your favorite for a specific meal. For example, I like to go to the area of Bevagna and Montefalco, which is the wine area, where you find very nicely the Trattoria. And I like to go in the area of Valnerina. Valnerina is one of the valleys that goes south of Assisi towards Spoleto. And also there you just find these little villages and then there's, for example, fresh trout. There are villages that they just go out and they have the stream and they get the trout and they cook it on the fire for you and they serve also that with truffle. So if you like truffle, you're just like in paradise. But you can't even buy proper trout here. And I'm only like 45 minutes because it's a very small production so they don't come out of that specific area.

Katy

This is what I love about you Italians. You keep all the good stuff for yourself. I know here in Australia we've got some amazing produce but unfortunately it gets sent overseas quite a lot and - all the best stuff does anyway. But not in Italy. They keep it for themselves and the tastiest dish is never far from where the produce has come from. I think so that's why it's so tasty.

Letizia

Yeah, absolutely. I buy meat from a butcher in the town of Santa Maria de Angeles which is just down the hill from Assisi. And the cows he breeds, they are like 5 km out of town and they're happy cows. I visited them. I don't eat much beef, but if I eat beef, it has to be that beef.

Katy

I bet you wave to them every time you go past because just in case, make sure they're happy.

Letizia

Yeah. It's not free ranging because we don't have good pastures. So when you come to Umbria you will not see cows outside unless it's at higher altitude. But this specific cow, they have like a big terrace where they can go out and bask in the sun.

Katy

What more do you need?

Letizia

Yeah, it's a good thing. And mostly I eat vegetables because I prepare my vegetables. But I think it's also good to support the small artisans like these ones. And this is one of the things I do. I go from village to village to see - oh, oh, here they're producing like I was telling you the other day, saffron. They're producing saffron in Umbria since the 1500s is quite amazing. And so I get my saffron from a market. Of course I can't buy it every day because it's quite a trick to go there. But really you have to come to Umbria to see the countryside. Unfortunately you do need a car to visit Umbria because otherwise you miss the best. You have to see the beautiful medieval towns and they are absolutely fantastic. But then you have to take the car and just go a little bit out and stop around and have some fabulous meals.

Katy

Yeah, sounds amazing. Well, I think it's pretty easy. Like you can get the train to Perugia or Orvieto and then you can hire the car from there. I think that's an excellent idea because who wants to drive straight out of Rome or Florence anyway? No, if you take the fast train to Perugia or Orvieto, get out, have a look around and then as Letizia says, go have a look around that beautiful countryside - which all the flowers are going to be coming out soon, aren't they?

Letizia

Yeah. We have a special site where there is an absolutely marvelous blooming. This is in the Sibillini Mountains, which are part of the Apennines and we have a whole plateau that in the early summer is completely covered by a rainbow of flowers. There's people that come to see it from all over the world.

Katy

Yes.

Letizia

And this is also the place where they grow the special lentils. So you can go there and buy yourself some very good lentils.

Katy

And if you even have just have a look on the internet and you can see you can probably Google Umbria and poppies - they have fields and fields of poppies and sunflowers. Beautiful.

Letizia

Yeah. From spring from, say, the next couple of weeks to the early summer, we have flowers everywhere because it's still, um, it's very natural. You just go out from the main highway and you are immediately in the countryside.

Katy

What a beautiful part of the world. And thank you for such a fascinating insight into the cuisine of your area in Umbria. Thank you, Letizia. Now, if our listeners want to learn more and stay in contact with you or buy your cookbooks or take part in one of your cooking classes, how can they do that?

Letizia

So I have a website madonnadelpiatto.com And I also have Facebook and Instagram. I haven't been very good on Instagram lately, but you can always contact me there too. And hopefully you will also come here to see us.

Katy

Well, I will. I'm definitely coming.

Letizia

Marvelous.

Katy

And we'll put all the links. We're going to put all Letizia's details onto the show notes for this episode, of course. And really go and check out her website because there is an absolutely huge library of recipes there that she shared and really everyone has a little story or the context attached to it. She's really put a lot of effort into that - that's a really beautiful and impressive body of work, actually. So, Grazie Letizia, thank you for joining us on Untold Italy today and I cannot wait to taste as many of these dishes as I can when we're in Umbria later this year.

Letizia

Thank you so much and I'm looking forward to seeing you in, Umbria this year. Thank you very much and goodbye to everybody.

Letizia

Ciao. A presto. Ciao.

Katy

Grazie Mille. Thank you.

Katy

Beautiful Umbria is hiding in plain sight just off the main tourist route between Rome and Florence. Often described as the “new Tuscany” it’s a place to explore the countryside and discover the rustic, quiet towns and villages and unique culture that has endured over many centuries. As Letizia said, most regions of Italy were home to royal courts and external influences, so Umbria, that saw no such action may indeed be one of the few places where you can experience ancient traditions - food and otherwise - of the Italian peninsula in their purest form.

All the details and links to the recipes Letizia mentioned are in the show notes at untolditaly.com/117 for episode 117 as well as how to contact Letizia at Alla Madonna del Piatto in case you’d like to learn from her in that beautiful property overlooking Assisi.

Thanks to all our wonderful listeners for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today’s show. If you did then it would be amazing if you gave us a rating or review in your favorite podcast app. If you’re using apple podcasts then you need to go to the show page for Untold Italy - not the episode page - and scroll down until you see “ratings and reviews” You can leave your 5-star review and message there.

On next week’s episode, I’m going to share some common mistakes people make - me included - when they’re planning their trip to Italy

But until then it’s “ciao for now”