

Untold Italy Episode 143 - 7 Delicious local dishes from Abruzzo

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 143.

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 Italy-loving travelers. Are you ready to travel into a truly "untold" area of Italy? On today's episode, we're visiting the beautiful region of Abruzzo that shares a border with Lazio - the region of Rome and the Adriatic Sea. It's a region of mountains and coast and traditions as old as time.

Many migrants made their way from Abruzzo to the United States, Canada, and Australia but somehow this region still flies under the radar for visitors

Today I'm chatting with American author **Domenica Marchetti** a former journalist who has published several cookbooks - 7 I believe with another on the way - combining her love of cooking and her Abruzzese heritage. She focuses on the simple, produce-driven fare of the Abruzzo region which is immediately satisfying and comforting.

By the way, Domenica means "Sunday" in Italian which is a great day for preparing slow-cooked dishes and gathering around the family table. So I think her parents chose it perfectly for her.

Talking to Domenica was like chatting with an old friend and I can't wait for you to meet her so let's dive in.

Katy

Benvenuta Dominica. Ciao. And welcome to the Untold Italy Podcast.

Domenica

Thank you for having me.

Katy

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We're so happy to have you here and it's amazing to have you on the show today. And I followed your work for a little while now and I was so grateful to our mutual friend Danielle Oteri for putting us in touch. Domenica, I gave our listeners a brief introduction to you and your work, but we'd love to hear your story in your own words.

Domenica

Well, I'll start with my dirty little secret. So I write cookbooks. I'm a food writer, but I never went to culinary school, so I always like to tell people that story because I'm a total home cook and my background is actually in journalism, so I have a master's degree in journalism and I was a newspaper reporter for a long time. And then when I had young children, I decided to become a freelancer and I kind of reinvented myself as a food writer since food was my passion anyway. I grew up in an Italian family and so instead of debating politics at the dinner table, we talked about what we are going to eat tomorrow night and all of that. So food really was my big interest and I just started writing about Italian food, which is what I love more than anything, and it kind of went from there. And I've written 7 cookbooks with an 8th on the way on Italian home cooking. And I have a weekly newsletter on substack called Buona Domenica, which comes out every Sunday appropriately, and then I give occasional small group tours and workshops in Italy. And like you, I have a very deep passion for the country, and every time I go there, I learned something new, so that's why I keep going back.

Katy

It's almost like a primal pull, isn't it? Somehow. You know, there's a whole big world out there, but somehow we keep going back to Italy.

Domenica

Yes. I always said that I thought that by the time I hit middle age, I would have seen a lot more of the world than I actually have. But every time I travel, it's really just Italy I want to go back to. And that's because it's a small country, but every region is vast and deep in its own way and there's so much to discover or rediscover and yeah, I'll never get tired of it, that I know.

Katy

Me too. And I think as well, when you come from an immigrant family, and it doesn't matter how many generations back, there seems to be always a really strong desire to understand a little bit more about where you came from, the places that formed your identity. And so whereabouts in Italy did your family come from?

Domenica

Well, a variety of places. The one I identify most with is, of course, Abruzzo. My mother was born and raised in the city of Chieti in Abruzzo. Her mother was actually from the city of Atri,

which is also in Abruzzo, and her dad was from Perugia, but she was born and raised in Chieti and on my dad's side - his parents were both born in Italy. His mom was from Isernia in Molise, which of course used to be part of Abruzzo, but that was a separate region. And his dad was from Fondi, which is a small city. I don't know if it's so small anymore, but a city in the region of Lazio where Rome is. So it's all kind of that southern/central part of Italy. But my mom grew up in Abruzzo, came to the US in the 1950s, but her family stayed over there. And so I spent my summers in Abruzzo when I was growing up. So we had a beach house on the Adriatic coast of Abruzzo in Silvi Marina. So from the end of June to the end of August, I pretty much was laying out on the beach, burning to a crisp and hanging out with my friends and traveling with my folks. So I couldn't have asked for a more idyllic childhood, to be honest.

Katy

I know. I think we tend to forget now that travel is so easy, we'll just pretend the last two years didn't happen, but. I think we tend to forget that probably would have been actually quite an unusual thing to do back in those days.

Domenica

Yeah, it was. And that's probably one of the reasons why we would just go and stay over. I feel like we can go over and come back so much more frequently now, which is probably not a very good thing environmentally, so I am actually trying to spend longer chunks of time there. But yeah, it was a real gift to be able to do that. And my mom had three sisters, none of them ever married, so they were kind of working women at a time when that was pretty unusual in Italy. So eventually in the 60s, they moved from Abruzzo to Rome and shared an apartment in Rome. So I spent a little bit of time in Rome at the beginning and end of every summer and then the rest of the time at the beach. And then when my dad would come over, poor guy actually did have to work and so we would come over for a couple of weeks in summer and we would just travel around Italy with him. And he absolutely loved Abruzzo. So I got to see Abruzzo is a beautiful region. It's very green. It's got three national and regional parks within its borders, and it extends from the Apennine Mountains out to the Adriatic coast. So the terrain is very different in various provinces in different places, and the cuisine is also very diverse. And that's one of the things that I learned as I was growing up and just as I got older, I wanted to know more and more about it.

Katy

Absolutely. So just so listeners can get a picture of exactly where Abruzzo is on the map. How far is it and where is it in relation to Rome?

Domenica

It's due east of Rome, and it's kind of mid-calf on the boot that is Italy. And for any Americans who might be listening, I always kind of describe it as the Missouri of Italy. So if you

know anything about the US, you know that Missouri is kind of the gateway to the west. Kansas City, Missouri, is kind of bordering on the west. Then it's kind of also a gateway to the south and also kind of right there in the Midwest. So it's got a little bit of influence from various parts of the US. And Abruzzo is sort of the same way. On the west, that is bordered by Lazio and the region that contains Rome. And then to the south, there is Molise. But Molise, as I said, used to be part of Abruzzo, and that is attached to Campania and Puglia. And then to the north east, it is bordered by La Marche, so we're sort of inching into the north at that point. And then there are also parts of Abruzzo that are not quite, but almost -very, very close to Tuscany and Umbria. So you do feel all these various influences in the culture and the cuisine and the landscape of Abruzzo. So that's why I love it. There's a lot of variety in the region. I think a lot of people just don't know that and don't realize that it was a difficult region to navigate for a long time because of the mountains. That's changed, and that changed decades ago with the Autostrade. But when I was little and we used to drive from Rome out to our house in Silvi Marina, it used to take it was like a four and a half hour drive because the Autostrade wasn't yet finished and they hadn't blasted through the Gran Sasso. So we would have to take the Strada Statale, the state roads and local roads and it was a much longer, winding road than it is today.

Katy

So how long does it take to get there today by car?

Domenica

Well, depending on where you go, you can actually get to the border of Abruzzo in less than 2 hours or maybe an hour and a half. And then, like I said, it extends from the beginning of the Apennines, kind of the backbone of Italy, and from Lazio to Abruzzo, you sort of hit the Apennine Mountains and the province of L'Aquila, and then you have to traverse through the mountains. We have a little house in the province of Pescara in the hills, and it's actually, I want to say it's about 3 hours drive, maybe a little bit less. And that's because where our house is, we're about 45 minutes from the Autostrade. So it's like a two hour shot if you're taking the Autostrade. But then there are a lot of places in Abruzzo that you still have to drive through the hills, through the mountains. They're still a bit remote. It's funny because everything looks very close together on a map, but if you want to go from a town in L'Aquila to a town in the province of Teramo or Pescara or Chieti, you have to cross those mountains and it takes time.

Katy

Yeah, Google is a trickster.

Domenica

Yes.

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Katy

You can see things on the map and you're like "yeah, it shouldn't take too long", but yeah, I think you can't underestimate those country roads.

Domenica

Well, exactly. And even the towns - our house is in a little city in the province of Pescara, and we're actually in town in the Centro Historico but if you try to rely on Google to get you to our house, you will never get there.

Katy

I love it. And you know what? I always - despite so many trips and experiences that I should learn, but I don't. And so there's always a point in the trip where I just have that hand on the head moment where I was like, I just trusted Google. Why did I do that? But, yeah, I mean, Abruzzo is really hiding in plain sight there really isn't.

Domenica

It is.

Katy

It's just like waiting to be discovered. And I think some of the charm of those regions where you do have the mountains and it's a little bit of extra effort to get around, it means that, you know, I like putting in a little bit of extra effort, usually uncover some amazing sights and experiences when you travel that way.

Domenica

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's true. And one of the charms of Abruzzo is that it is not overrun with tourists. They are more than there used to be and of course, the coast of Abruzzo, which extends up from Alba Adriatica all the way down from the edge of La Marche all the way down to Molise, it's quite long and there are beautiful sandy beaches. So the beach towns have always been crowded, or at least for many, many decades. But other than that, as you venture inland, it's a lot less crowded, even in summer. I'm not saying that they're not tourists - there definitely are, but there are far fewer and you can really enjoy experiences there. You can go for miles and not encounter another car, just encounter a couple of cars or maybe a herd of sheep or cows crossing the road. And of course, for me, that's why I absolutely love it. And I appreciate that it is harder to go places there. And maybe it doesn't have the high Renaissance art of Florence but it's got so much natural beauty and these incredible mountain towns carved into the mountains and of course, ancient art and the beauty of the coast. The beauty of the hills. Because you've got the very rocky terrain of the mountains and then the sort of nice bucolic hills and foothills where olives and wine grapes are grown. And then, of course, the Adriatic coast.

Katy

And I think it's obviously this terrain and this connection to the land which really informs the dishes and starting with the produce, and which it always does in Italy. So what are the main products that you find? Obviously have seafood and olive oil and wine, which is very up and coming.

Domenica

Yeah. So if you start at the coast, there's all the wonderful Adriatic seafood, which I live not far from the Atlantic Ocean. I live near the Chesapeake Bay here in Virginia, and we have wonderful crabs, but you don't get that small, really flavorful briny seafood of the Adriatic. The scampi, the pannocchia, the little clams, the mussels - there's just so much wonderful seafood on the coast. And then as you venture in, you've got the olive groves, and like I said, the wine grapes. Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, Pecorino white wine, which is becoming very popular, has been becoming very popular for the last couple of decades. Cerasuolo, which is a robust rose made from Montepulciano grapes. And then there are other - I'm not a wine expert - that's more my husband's area. And then, of course, wonderful vegetables and fruits like many Italian regions, walnuts, peppers, tomatoes, like Calabrians or Calabrese, we Abruzzese, love our pepperoncino, so we love our hot peppers and if you go to pretty much any restaurant, there's an array of different types of hot peppers. They'll put out fresh hot peppers, long green ones and long red ones - depending on their ripeness. They will put out dried peppers and you'll have these little scissors where you can just snip the pepper right into your food, and then they have the hot pepper in oil. So there's all kinds of ways that the Abruzzos says they enjoy their hot peppers.

Domenica

I have to say, I have never eaten better potatoes than the potatoes from Avezzano. Avezzano is kind of a low plain that if you're going from Lazio out to the coast, you generally pass Avezzano, which is like there are a few areas that are flat in Abruzzo, and that is one of them. And I was told that these potatoes are so good because they are cultivated in what was once a lake. And so this ancient lake bed and the minerals in the soil are what feed these potatoes and give them their incredible flavors. So they have these creamy yellow potatoes that are just so good roasted. So, yeah, lots of wonderful vegetables.

Domenica

And then as you get into the mountains - Abruzzo for many centuries was a pastoral economy, shepherding - so the raising of sheep. And in the summer, the sheep would come up from Puglia to grazing in the mountains of Abruzzo, and then in the winter, they went back down to Puglia. So there's this kind of symbiotic relationship from bringing the sheep up and back from Puglia to Abruzzo. So we have wonderful sheep's milk, cheeses, lamb, mutton, castrato, and then pork, Abruzzo like a couple of other regions around, Umbria, and Lazio - Abruzzo also

has its version of porchetta and then beef as well, and bovine cheeses. And because of our connection with Puglia, I think we also have very good mozzarella and scamorza. And so it really is a wonderful array of natural, delicious culinary products that you find in the region. It's a real treasure trove.

Katy

Absolutely. And I think that on that side of Italy as well, because there was not so much royal influence or refined pastry making and all of that that came with those royal households that were happening on the other side of the country, you still have that sense of that real, original, rustic cooking that perhaps (you get that everywhere in Italy), but I really find that side of the country. You really get to the heart of it.

Domenica

Yes, I agree with you. There are, of course, fancy pastry shops now, but if you look at Italian cookbooks that have sections on Abruzzo, chapters on a brutal, there's very little in the way of fancy pasticceria - it's very rustic and the cooking is also quite rustic. Now we have the famous Michelin-starred chef Nico Romito in Abruzzo. He's from Abruzzo and he takes the ingredients from the region and I think he takes this very rustic home cooking and does amazing things with it. But we also have many wonderful sort of old-school family restaurants that maybe the husbands in the front of the house and the wife and mother in the back doing the cooking. I can't tell you how many restaurants like that I've encountered over the years. And the cooking is just wonderful. Sometimes you'll find a place that doesn't even have a menu. You walk in, you sit down and you get what they're making that day, whatever pasta they're making that day, whatever secondo. So I really love that homey, family-style cooking. And Abruzzo really does it well.

Katy

I mean, there's something really amazing about it too, because if you are cooking that way, then you can really only cook with what you have available and it's very seasonal and it's obviously very local. We're not shipping in avocados from who knows where to make something fancy. And that's when food tastes the best, I think.

Domenica

Yes, I absolutely agree. There are the wonderful products of the Maiella. So there's the Gran Sasso range and the Maiella range. And Abruzzo, there are four provinces in Abruzzo, so you're either on one side of the Gran Sasso or the other, or you're on one side of the Maiella or the other. And with the national parks and the regional parks, there's all sorts of wonderful foraging that takes place not only for things like mushrooms and grains and grains for flour grains, there's wonderful Faro, there's Solina, which is an ancient variety of wheat that has been making a comeback, but also legumes lentils, chickpeas, red chickpeas, which I've never seen anywhere else. And things like saffron. Saffron has a very particular history in Abruzzo

and you wouldn't necessarily think it belongs in a place like Abruzzo, but centuries ago, a Spanish monk whose family was actually from Navelli came back and brought some crocus bulbs in his pocket and planted them and they thrived. And so here we are centuries later, and Abruzzo has some of the most wonderful they call it ora rosso - red gold. And the threads are just this beautiful burnished red gold. And the saffron is just smoky. And so you find saffron in chickpea soup or in seafood dishes. And as you can tell, I could go on forever.

Katy

Well, why don't we go on about - let's actually just talk about some of the dishes you can try there, because with this podcast, it is a travel podcast, but in my heart, the travel and the food are completely, 100% connected. So what are some of the dishes that we can try when we go to Abruzzo to really get to the heart of the region and understand it a little bit better?

Domenica

Yeah. So let's start in the mountains. I'm going to start with one of my absolute favorite dishes and experiences, and that is eating Arrosticini. Are you familiar with Arrosticini Abruzzese?

Katy

Well, I am. It's all these meat skewers, like tiny little pieces of meat that are barbequed.

Domenica

Yes. So they are skewers and they're skewers of I say lamb, but it's not really lamb, it's either pecora, which is older lamb. I don't want to say mutton because everybody has such negative associations with the way mutton tastes, but it's kind of teenage sheep, I would say, or castrato, which is the male version of the sheep. So these skewers are composed of just little tiny cubes of this meat and they used to all be cut by hand. Now they have these contraptions where you can just kind of pile the meat in and they have these blades that cut it into strips and then into little tiny cubes and then it even sort of automatically skewers them. So you can skewer many at one time. It's much more efficient than doing it all by hand. When we do them here at home, we actually do them by hand. So they're these tiny little skewers and they're done on these narrow, long grills. They are seasoned with nothing except their own fat and flavor. And then finally, at the very end of grilling, a little bit of salt. And the best place to eat Arrosticini are at these refugio, way up in Campo Imperatore, which is the highest plain of the Gran Sasso mountain range. And that's where you see a lot of these sheep and cattle grazing so dotted along this high plain. If you have kind of the American West in mind. A lot of the old spaghetti Westerns, as we used to call them, were filmed in Campo Imperatore because it kind of looked like the American West. It's also known as little Tibet, because I've never been to Tibet, but apparently it looks like that as well, but very kind of vast plain. We're above the tree line, so there isn't a lot of green around. It's just all rock and a little bit of grass. And in the distance, you can see the highest peak of the Grand Sasso mountains. But you're basically surrounded just by nature. And these little refugio are kind of sprinkled miles

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apart on the range and you drive up and it's just literally just rows of picnic tables and rows of grills. And you go inside these rustic buildings and you buy your Arrosticini, which you grill yourself. You can buy sausages, local sausages, you can buy salumi, Abruzzo makes some really good salumi, some sheep's milk, cheeses, they have some sottaceti and sott'olio. So you can buy all these things for picnic, beer and water. You go out to your picnic table, somebody blasts the grill to life with the high-powered sort of torch, and then you just have the best picnic of your life.

Katy

It's actually a video on your Instagram, isn't there?

Domenica

Yes, there is of our most recent visit, yes. And it is as awesome as it looks. It's really an otherworldly experience. I've done a few tours in Abruzzo - small group tours, and the partners I worked with just put together the most incredible picnic. I mean, they bring up tablecloths and cutlery and good wine and liqueurs and all of this stuff, and so we make it a real celebration. But even if you're just going with the rustic table and the Arrosticini, you're going to have a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Katy

Yeah, for sure. It's those little traditions as well that makes Italy so special. I was mentioning to Domenica before when we had a chat before, that in Australia, some of the immigrants here would actually do the same thing. And when you have a place right near one of my aunt's houses, where they had those grills set up and so it's a really lovely tradition. It's so communal and so friendly as well. Love it.

Domenica

Yeah, it really is. And it's what the Abruzzese do on holidays and days off. And it's so nice to get away, the fuori porta concept, but it really is a special thing.

Katy

And so, obviously, not everyone likes meat, but I do, especially when it's really tasty and you don't need so much of it because it's so rich and it's just intense flavor. So you have your bits of meat.

Domenica

Yes, but I will say it is hard to stop eating these. They're sort of like popcorn or peanuts. So you kind of bring the skewer to your mouth and just sort of slide the pieces of meat off. And they're very small. And there's I don't know how many per skewer, but not that many. So if you're not careful, you can find yourself one after another. You have to eat them when they're

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nice and hot, too, so you got to go through them quickly. But, yeah, they are really something else delicious.

Katy

Okay, now tell us about the cheese, because I'm a big cheesy person.

Domenica

So Abruzzo is known for its sheep's milk cheeses, and there's a variety of different kinds of pecorino. There's aged pecorino and semi-aged pecorino. One of, I think, probably the most famous cheesemaker in the Abruzzo was Gregorio Rotolo, who had Agriturismo and Caseificio in the province of L'Aquila outside of Scannese, and he passed away some months ago, but he was wow, just an incredibly creative cheese maker, but a shepherd through and through. So he made a number of really interesting aged pecorino cheeses, and he also made salumi. Sheep's milk ricotta is very common in Abruzzo, so hard to find here where I live in Virginia, and I absolutely love it. And you're, you know, they use it for ravioli, for lasagna. They just put it out at breakfast time and either just a little bit of honey or mosto cotto cooked grape must over it, and it's really just sweet and delicious. But a lot of people don't realize that Abruzzo also has very good cow's milk cheeses. And I mentioned before our relationship with Puglia, so at some point, Puglia and Campania where wonderful mozzarella is made. Some of that came over into Abruzzo. So you get the really good fresh cow's milk mozzarella, and you also get really good scamorza, which is slightly aged, a little bit drier, and one of my absolute favorite dishes is Scamorza ai ferri, and this can be made with regular scamorza or smoked scamorza. The scamorza is kind of cut in half and just grilled until it's charred on the outside and really gooey and soft on the inside. And you can just sort of scoop it up with bread or cut it with a fork and knife. It's as good as meat, in my opinion. And I like to serve it at home when I'm lucky enough to find some decent scamorza. Or if I bring some shrink wrap back from Abruzzo, I sometimes roast it in the oven and then serve it with roasted peppers or something like that. It makes a really good dinner. I know it sounds a little crazy, but it really is delicious, and it's kind of milky and salty and briny. It has wonderful flavor, so good cheeses in Abruzzo.

Katy

Well, I actually am starting to feel a bit sorry for our average cheese toastie to you, I think you call them grilled cheese in America. It's just not even fair to compare it, is it?

Domenica

No, it's really impossible. And I think the variety of Italian cheese is really I think it's not well known. People know parmeggiano. They know pecorino, maybe Grana Padano, they know mozzarella. Burrata is so popular now, mozzarella di bufalo - which is all wonderful, but every region in Italy also has some really good lesser-known cheeses. So it's always fun to explore that. And Abruzzo, of course, is no exception.

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Katy

Yes. Delicious. I think Italy has got the biggest variety of cheeses in the world, actually. I think the French like to think that they do but.

Domenica

Yeah, that's interesting. I would have thought it would have been France. Wow. Fascinating. I know Italy has a large variety of cheeses, for sure, but I didn't know about the cheese. That's really interesting.

Katy

Yeah. Apparently, there's more than 400.

Domenica

I'm going to taste them all.

Katy

Yes. Let's do it. Let's do it. I will have a challenge with you. We can do a cheese tour. Does anyone want to come along? All right. Oh, my gosh. I can talk about cheese all day. Okay, well, what else can we try?

Domenica

I'm going to take you to the province of Teramo, and I want to talk about Scrippelle 'Mbusse which means infused crespella - crepes. So there's obviously this centuries-old relationship between Italian cuisine and French cuisine. I don't know whether the crepes came over from France or went over to France from Italy, but you will see a number of dishes in Abruzzo made with crepes, and they have something called Timballo di Crespelle, which is the Abruzzese version of lasagna, which is layered crepes with cheese and ragus and it's ethereal. But something that I really love, because I'm a soup lover, is Scrippelle 'Mbusse or Crespelle in brodo. You make these very large, thin crepes with egg. I make them with milk, but I think traditionally they're made with water, so they're very light. And you sprinkle a good amount of grated pecorino cheese on them, and you roll them up cigar style, and you put them on plates, and then you ladle very hot homemade broth over them. So they're very simple, but they are just fantastic. And they're one of my favorite dishes to make and eat during winter. And if you can imagine being in the mountains of Abruzzo, where it can be very cold and also damp, sitting down to a plate of this steaming hot homemade chicken broth or meat broth, and then just kind of cutting into these crepes and having the melty pecorino cheese inside and their lightest air, and they are so good.

Domenica

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I like to serve them as a first course at Thanksgiving.

Katy

Ohhh

Domenica

Yeah. Or Easter. I mean, sometimes I do one or the other, but they're just a really nice kind of primo piatto. They're quite rustic and elegant at the same time, which is something that I would say the cuisine is good at, I think.

Katy

Well, just when you think there's no more ways to do pancakes.

Domenica

Yeah. And I don't know if this is true. As you know, a lot of foods come along with sort of stories that may or may not be true, but according to cookbooks that I have, they're not that old. I guess they date back to maybe World War II or post World War II. And it said that an officer's Mess Hall in Teramo, there was a French cook who was helping the Italian chef, and he made crepes instead of bread because he felt they were lighter and easier to digest. And as he was handling this plate of crepes, it slipped from his hand and fell into a pot of broth. And so to salvage the dish, they turned it into this soup with crepe. So that's the tale that goes along with the invention of this dish. I don't know how true it is.

Katy

Well, I find food history really fascinating, especially Italian food history, because obviously, the tomatoes didn't come until much later in the scene. And so you've got this continually evolving cuisine, which people think has been there for centuries, but they're always trying to find ways to improve. And that's something that I really love about Italy. There's, like, a strong sense of tradition, but there's also continual innovation as well.

Domenica

Yeah. And I think a lot of people don't realize that. You see everybody talking about how you can only make carbonara this way, and it doesn't have garlic, and it doesn't have cream, and it doesn't have this, and it doesn't have that. If you go back 40, 50 years and look at carbonara recipes from back then, it was different. So cuisine always is evolving. Even in Italy, where people think Italians are so rigid about their food, I think they're less rigid than people realize.

Katy

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Yeah, but I mean, always, always comes back to what's available and what's fresh and what's good. And so even though there's innovation, it's always that respect for the ingredients and the tradition as well.

Domenica

Absolutely. And then there's the cook themselves. I mean, you bring the cook into the equation, and everybody's dish is going to be a little bit different.

Katy

Yeah. My mother in law, she emigrated to Australia from Campania in the 1950s, and she and her best friends, that's all they talk about. They've got this one really great conversation that goes on like it's been going on for 40 years, probably more about how to make this Biscotti. It's so funny - it's like, "no, you use three eggs". "No, you use four!" And it's like, oh, my gosh, my gosh.

Domenica

Yes. Everybody is very opinionated about it. So I should probably talk about Abruzzo's signature dish that's most famous, which is Spaghetti alla Chitarra, which is a long noodle, and it's a square cut noodle. If you can imagine kind of a square cross-section. When you cut the noodle in half, it looks square shape. And so the Chitarra is an instrument that I believe dates to the 19th century. And from my understanding, it was made by the artisans or the people who made the setacci, the sifters, the flour sifters started making these instruments to make pasta making easier. And so it's a rectangular wooden instrument strung with thin wires. And you roll out your sheet of pasta, and you roll it quite thick because you roll it about the same thickness as the width between the strings of the Chitarra. And then you cut your piece of pasta into sheets and put one at a time on the Chitarra. And you have a little rolling pin and you roll up and down the length of this Chitarra, this instrument, and you cut through that sheet with the wires and they fall to the bottom of the Chitarra.

Domenica

So you have this handful of beautiful square, kind of thick, square cut noodles and they're just a really satisfying noodle to eat. There are a number of recipes. You can make them with all semolina flour and egg, or semolina flour, egg, and water, or a little semolina and a little double zero flour, which is what I like to do, an egg. But it's a very sturdy pasta and so it makes a very sturdy noodle. And the typical way to sauce Spaghetti alla Chitarra is with an Abruzzese style ragu. So the one I make has a mixture of meats. It has a little bit of lamb in it, a little bit of beef, pork. I know that stewing hen is sometimes used, but we don't grind the meat like they do in Tuscany. You brown pieces of meat and then you take meat out and you put your Battuto in your celery, carrots and onion. And then you saute those and you put the meat back in and you add your tomato paste to and you simmer it for a very long time. So in the end, what you end up with is a meat-infused sauce, which is what you serve with the

pasta. And then the meat you serve either as a second course or you chop it up and put it in ravioli. So there are different things you can do with that. So you can sort of make two meals out of it. And then if it's a special occasion, you also make these teeny tiny pallotte, which are little tiny meatballs made from veal. And they're literally the size of a tiny chickpea, like a dry chickpea, they're that small. And even if you're just using a pound of veal, it can take forever to make them. But if you're making this for a special occasion, you want your little pallotte there and you fry those and then you add those to the sauce. So it's a very rich sauce and it's what the efforts you eat on Sundays or on special occasions. And it really is just fantastic that the pasta is so good and got that nice texture to it. And the meat is very sauce is very robustly flavored. So that is probably one of the dishes that Abruzzo is most famous for.

Katy

It sounds like a very abundant and generous dish.

Domenica

Yes, and so probably not something you're going to want to make on a Tuesday night.

Katy

But you can also get lighter pasta dishes can't you? Probably closer to the coast.

Domenica

Yes, and I'll tell you about my favorite coastal dish, which is a dish that I had many years ago when I was a girl. And one night we went to this restaurant in Francavilla al Mare, which is one of the coastal towns just a little bit south of Sylvi. And I have very vague recollections of that night at all, but my dad ordered a dish called Spaghetti alla Farouk, which was named for the deposed king of Egypt, King Farouk. And it had just kind of inexplicably curry powder, saffron. Saffron, because that is an Abruzzese ingredient, but curry powder and saffron and then also was served with scampi. So the scampi, they look like little lobsters. They're not really they're- sort of in between lobsters and shrimp, but they're one of the seafoods of Abruzzo. So the sauce was this beautiful, creamy golden hue, and it was infused with the flavor of the seafood, but also the curry powder and a little bit of spice and the saffron. And none of us had ever tasted anything like it. And so when we went home, when we came home to the US. After the summer, my mom tried to recreate it in our kitchen. And of course, you can't get real scampi in New Jersey, which is where I grew up. So she used shrimp and I think, I don't know, maybe scallops. And anyway, she made her own version of it, which was quite rich and really delicious. And so we had that for many years. And of course, the original just kind of faded from memory, and none of us could remember - I'm talking about like, 40 plus years ago, none of us could remember where this dish had come from. But when I was working on my book, the Glorious Pasta of Italy, I knew I wanted to include a recipe for Farouk. So I made my mom's, and I kind of pared it down a little. I took out some extra

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ingredients that she had added, like egg yolk, and hers was a very enriched sort of 1970s version. And I made this pasta - was published in the book and I heard from a few people who said, oh, that restaurant is called La Nave. It's in Francavilla, and it's still there, and they still make Farouk. So finally, after all these years, last fall, I went to La Nave with my husband and had a dish of Spaghetti alla Farouk. And they say you can never go back, but with this dish, with this place, it was fantastic. And La Nave is a very particular restaurant. I think it may actually be constructed with parts of an old boat. So it looks like you're on a boat, a ship. And yeah, it's a very nautical theme. It's a little kind of kitschy and quirky, but the food is fantastic. It's right on the water. And I thought I'd died and gone to heaven as I was enjoying this plate of spaghetti alla farouk.

Domenica

In Abruzzo, they also have Spaghetti Alla Vongole, Vongole, cozze - very more typical seafood. Farouk has sort of become popular, and it served at other restaurants now, but that, I believe, was the original. The restaurant opened in 1950, and I think that was their signature dish for many years, and indeed it still is.

Katy

Well, I mean, food memories like that, you carried that with you for so long, and then you have that moment. It's so special. Just - I imagine it would have been quite emotional actually, I would have been.

Domenica

It was. It was - because it was not long after my mom had passed away, and I just had the feeling she was looking down and just enjoying seeing this whole scene. I think the people at the restaurant thought I was nuts because I just kept taking pictures of my dish of pasta and oohing and ahing over it. So it was a little embarrassing, but well worth it.

Katy

It amazing. I love that story. It's beautiful. But you know as well, I think - we concentrate a lot on the proteins as well but you don't always need to have meat or seafood when you're in Italy. And there are other dishes from Abruzzo that really make best use of some of the lentils and beans and local produce that comes from the hills.

Domenica

Yes. And of course, in so much of Italy, meat was really a special occasion food. It wasn't something that people ate every day. My mother, when I was growing up, made the most wonderful lentil soup, and I think there's a recipe for it on my website, Domenica Cooks. And, you know, simple, just carrot, onion, celery, lentils, broth, but so good. So, you know, a lot of these nourishing soups, chickpea soup, chickpea and pasta soups, lasagne di ceci and then

one of my favorite non meat dishes is, of course, cheese. In it, though, is something called Pallotte Cace e Ove, which I'm trying to say that in dialect, but Pallotte Cace e Ove. So Pallotte being polpette (meatballs) without the meat, made from stale bread soaked in water or milk, and then with egg and lots and lots and lots of pecorino cheese. And so you make these patties or balls out of this dense mixture, and you fry them in oil and then you simmer them in sauce as you would with meatballs. And they are absolutely delicious. I think they're kind of a Lenton food traditionally, and once upon a time, this was not a food you would ever find in a restaurant in Abruzzo. But I think there is this trend of rediscovery, of cucina casareccia and regional and local cuisine. And so many restaurants in Abruzzo now offer Pallotte Cace e Ove and it is so good. These meatballs are just rich and satisfying and just robustly flavored. You can really taste the pecorino, and they sort of soak up the sauce like sponges. And in the meantime, they also sort of give up some of their flavor to the sauce. The sauce gets kind of infused with the pecorino flavor. And, yeah, it's really, if you're going meatless but not cheeseless, it's one of my favorite things to have. Yeah.

Katy

I do feel sorry for vegans when it comes to things like this. Respect, if that's your choice, there's no judgment here but, my goodness, I would hate to miss out on that experience.

Domenica

Yeah. I think that I could almost live without meat. I do love pancetta and guanciale and those sort of flavor agents, but I would find it really hard to live without cheese, I think.

Katy

Yeah. And eggs.

Domenica

And eggs, yes.

Katy

One of those staples you just need in your life.

Domenica

Yeah.

Katy

And we talked a little bit about pasticceria and it's not a region that's known for fancy pastries or cakes, but what about everyone likes a bit of sweet treats, and I'm sure that would have its own little sweet treats.

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Domenica

Yeah, there are a number. But I will tell you about the other most famous food from Abruzzo. So I think in addition to Spaghetti alla Chitarra has to be Pizzelle or Ferratelle or Neole or Navole - different names for essentially the same thing. And so those round pizzelle cookies that have the beautiful patterns imprinted, and then they look like very thin waffles, they're made in a pizzelle iron. Nowadays, people use electric iron, but once upon a time, they kind of open and close like scissors or jaws. They're made with a batter, slightly sweet batter, not that sweet. Eggs, flour, milk, sugar, a little bit of maybe cinnamon. And you put the batter on the hot iron and then you close it, and so you get this beautiful waffle stamp pattern on your pizzelle. So I think if you go into any Italian bakery anywhere in the world, whether it's in the US or Australia or Italy or Japan, you will probably find pizzelle maybe in bags, stacked in bags. So this, I believe this cookie dates back to Roman times. I mean, it's many centuries old and in Abruzzo it was a wedding sweet. And so the waffle irons, the pizzelle irons, the design in the center, there would often be a little flat kind of rectangle or piece in which the family name or initials would be carved. And so when you made your pizzelle, your initials were carved into them. So if you brought them somewhere and everybody knew they were yours but this was apparently a gift. A pizzelle iron was a gift to give a bride. There are not many manufacturers of pizzelle irons anymore in Abruzzo, but there are a couple, and there is one that I think makes most of them. There's pretty much one company doing most of the manufacturing now, and they make beautiful patterns. And the heart pattern is one that's very popular. The little diamond patterns, the flower patterns. And they're mostly round, but they're also rectangular. You can find rectangular Ferratelle or Neole, and so you can eat them plain in Abruzzo. They like to spread Scrucchiata on them. And Scrucchiata is a very rustic jam that is made with Montepulciano d'Abruzzo grapes at the end of the wine harvest. Leftover grapes are often cooked down into this very rustic grazie jam. They're a wonderful breakfast food or snack food, and they can be very crispy or depending on the iron that you have, if it's a little bit thicker, they can be a little bit softer and more waffle like, depending on the iron and also the batter that you're making. But I think they are known the world over. They're pretty easy to make, but they can also be tricky, especially if you're trying to get that nice crisp - I like the thin ones that are very crisp and they're sort of deceptive because they're not like a chewy chocolate chip cookie or a brownie or a very typical American sweet. They're much more subtle, but when you bite into one, you have that wonderful sort of vanilla flavor, maybe a little bit of cinnamon. It's very crispy and light. They say uno tira l'altro. One sort of pulls the next little bit like the Arrosticini. It's hard to stop it at just one, but that is a very typical Abruzzo that you will see pretty much all over the region, whether they're called pizzelle or something else.

Katy

It's really interesting, actually. I haven't seen them much here in Australia at all, really. And so maybe you need to go where the Abruzzese are.

Domenica

So, yes, in the US and parts of the US, there are a lot of Abruzzese, but not in Australia?

Katy

Well, I think they did come over. I'm going to go looking for them. I'm going out to one of the biggest Italian bakeries in Melbourne later in the week and I'll keep my eye out for them because they tend to have pretty much everything, but I don't think I've ever seen them there, actually.

Domenica

Well, they're a little retro too. Maritozzi are very popular now, and Baci di Dama are maybe a little more fancy. But if you go to the old-school Italian American bakeries in the US, they always have the pizzelle.

Katy

Amazing. This has been such a wonderful journey through Abruzzo and its dishes. We talk about food a lot on these podcasts, but these are dishes that some of them I've never heard of. And I think it's really special, like we were saying at the start of the show, just that you can go not far, maybe a couple of hours, and you've got this whole new experience, not just in terms of landscape, but also in culture and food. And it's just really the reason why I know I continue to go back to Italy again and again. Now, Domenica, I know people would love to delve into more of this, and if they're cooks, they really would want to stay in touch with you. What's the best way for them to do that?

Domenica

Well, let's see. I am mostly active on Instagram and my handle is at [@domenicacooks](#). I have a website, www.domenicacooks.com, and I write a weekly newsletter on substack, as I mentioned earlier, called Buona Domenica. So you can go to substack and search Buona Domenica and it comes out every Sunday. Last week's newsletter was all about peppers. This week is a couple of interesting pasta dishes. I won't say more than that. I'm going to keep things a surprise, but it's always something different every week and so that is how people can find me.

Katy

Yeah, absolutely. Your Instagram is absolutely delightful. Food photography can be very tricky, but yours is so fresh and inviting and it just makes me hungry every time I look at it.

Domenica

Well, that's very kind of you. I am not a photographer and all my photos, I don't know, I think they all look the same. I know my limited abilities and I just stick with those. And I'm not a

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stylist by any means. I'm not a visual person. So I can't do the fancy styling. I basically just snap a picture of what I'm going to eat with my phone.

Katy

My husband is very suspicious of people who do any styling with tweezers when it comes to food.

Domenica

Yeah, I'm not sure I even own any tweezers.

Katy

But, I mean, that's the type of food that we eat every day. Sometimes we go out to eat and that's really special but I think sometimes it's the food that you have at home that you place on the table every night for dinner or on the weekends and the special occasions and those dishes that keep those connections alive. I think that you do an amazing job of bringing the dishes of Abruzzo to the world.

Domenica

Thank you so much. Well, as you can tell, I love it and I could go on and on about it.

Katy

Well, so could I, but unfortunately, our time has come to an end. But is one of those regions that haven't been to yet, but it's a massive priority for me now. So grazie Domenica, thank you so much for joining us on Untold Italy. And best of luck with your new book.

Domenica

Thank you so much. Thank you for having me. Bye.

Katy

You'll never stop me learning about or finding a way to share Italy's regional dishes. I just find it fascinating how there can be so much variety from region to region and town to town.

I must admit I definitely need the grilled scamorza and crepes in broth in my life, not to mention the arrosticini. Talk about the perfect Sunday afternoon going for a ramble in the mountains and stopping for some skewers of tasty lamb along the way.

Big thanks to Domenica for giving us the low down on the classic dishes of Abruzzo. If you're interested in cooking and/or learning more about this interesting region, do head over to her beautiful website and Instagram where you can delve into her recipes and stories.

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You'll find links to Domenica's website and all the dishes she mentioned in the show notes at untolditaly.com/143 for episode 143

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That's all for today, next week we're headed to Florence to learn about some great local wine bars to start or continue your Tuscan wine education but until then it's... "ciao for now".