

Untold Italy Episode 157 - All about Gelato

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 157.

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 travel lovers. Hope you're doing well and excitement is building for Italian trips in your not-too-distant future. I was going through our show episodes recently and I was a little bit shocked that I hadn't recorded an episode on this topic to be honest. No doubt I mention gelato A LOT on the show but given how much I love this Italian treat I do think it deserves its very own episode don't you think?

So today, what we're talking about is all things gelato. I'm going to fill you in on why it's so delicious, why it is a very, very different treat to ice cream, and where you're going to find the good stuff. Plus the flavors you should definitely try when you're in Italy, because you probably won't find them at home.

Katy

So are you ready? Adiamo! The gelato is waiting!

Katy

First up let's give you a quick rundown on what gelato is (and isn't). Gelato is the Italian word for ice cream and comes from the Latin word "gelātus" meaning frozen. In fact, almost 2000 years ago Emperor Nero would send his minions up into the mountains to get ice that was then mixed with fruit juices. Surely the precursor to gelato. So those Ancient Romans were at it again, setting trends that continue for centuries.

Katy

There are various stories about the creation of modern gelato but most seem to agree that it appeared at the Medici court in Florence and was such a big hit that Catherine de Medici, future Queen of France, took the recipe with her to Paris.

Katy

Well since then, over the years the recipe for gelato was perfected and it's now made with a combination of milk, cream, sugar, and ingredients like fresh fruit and nut purees. Sounds a bit like ice cream? Well yes but it's the ratio of milk and cream and the method of mixing that makes all the difference. You see gelato uses less cream and more milk than ice cream and

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typically contains 4-8% fat, compared with the 14-16% fat found in ice cream. Gelato is slowly churned and therefore has less air in it than ice cream and this makes for more dense and rich flavors. It's also served at a higher temperature which can make it a bit melty on a hot summer's day but this also means the flavors are even more intense.

Katy

This is your classic milk-based gelato but of course, in Italy, you'll also find sorbetti - fruit-based gelato with no milk - and in Sicily, you can try granita which is more like shaved ice with syrups on top. And yes, they are all 100% delicious. Well, most of them are. Just like anything really you can find good or great gelato and pretty average gelato and I'm going to tell you exactly how to know which is which.

Katy

Firstly, usually, I do a bit of research before I go to a new place and do a search for Gelato Artiginale - artisan gelato - in that place. Artisan gelato is generally handmade in smaller batches so there's more attention to quality and therefore flavor. There are no official credentials around this term that I'm aware of so it's best used as a first pass because some shops have realized that people are looking for that label and it can be a bit of a marketing ploy.

Katy

So the next thing to do is check out how the gelato is stored. As you now know, gelato is served at a high temperature than ice cream. If it is piled high inside a display cabinet it is not great gelato because the good stuff simply could not hold that altitude. Instead, look for gelato in low tubs sometimes covered with a metal lid and then you'll know you're getting a really perfectly made gelato.

Katy

Then take a good look at the color of the gelato. When you see very bright colors including greens, blues and pinks, run a mile. These hues can only be achieved with artificial colors and chemicals which is really not in the spirit of gelato making. Most gelato experts will assess the color of the pistachio flavor which should be a muted sage green - anything brighter and there is something else going on that's not quite natural.

Katy

Which brings us to... which flavors should you try? Probably my favorite topic I think. Of course, you're going to find all the classic flavors like chocolate, strawberry and vanilla but I think when you're in Italy you should really branch out and try something local. After all the best Italian gelateria source the absolute best local ingredients so their gelato has maximum flavor.

Katy

The purest gelato flavor you can try is called "fior di latte" which translates as flower of milk. Some say this is the flavor that marks a truly great gelateria and that's because, in the

absence of other flavorings, the essence and quality of the milk used in the gelato is absolutely critical. Fior di latte is simply milk, cream and sugar churned to perfection. It looks like vanilla but there is no vanilla flavoring, simply milky deliciousness. It is refreshingly simple and perfect just the way it is but if you must add something to your fior di latte gelato. Make it a drizzle of traditional balsamic vinegar of Modena. I had this in the small town called Spilamberto where balsamic vinegar is almost a religion and it was absolutely incredible

Katy

Other creamy flavors to try include crema - which is made with eggs and tastes like egg custard, stracciatella which is sort of like choc chip but the chocolate is in thin strips through the gelato instead of chips. I love that one. Zabaglione is a bit like crema but has a good slug of marsala wine for extra oomph.

Katy

Speaking of chocolate - you can get milk chocolate or super dark chocolate fondente and chocolate with hazelnuts - known as bacio.

Katy

Coffee is another delicious creamy flavor to try and to round out the creams. Try amarena which is fior di latte with swirls of sour cherry. This one is my kids favorite. But again, this one is a specialty of the Emilia Romagna region, and that's where you're going to find the most delicious versions.

Katy

Fruits are also great to try as gelato or sorbetto, from lemon, to strawberry and raspberry to pear and fig - these are best tried when the fruits are in season. You'll also see more exotic flavors like mango and banana but as these aren't grown in Italy I usually give them a miss. Instead, try herb-based flavors like basil - I had a brilliant one in Vernazza in the Cinque Terre last summer or Gelsi which is a local mulberry from Sicily. In Calabria, you can try bergamot flavor derived from the local citrus fruit

Katy

Now I mentioned this flavor before and it really is a classic, but you really need to try pistachio gelato. There's something about this delicious nut that pairs so well with the milky gelato base. Even better when there is a hint of salt to bring out the flavor. The very best pistachios come from a town called Bronte on the slopes of Mount Etna - Sicily's smoking volcano.. Shout out to our friends at Enoteca Sileno who told me that the nuts in Bronte are harvested by hand by a few very small producers. So look for the Bronte pistachio gelato if you want to try the ultimate version

Katy

Nuts are very popular way to flavor gelato. Except peanuts. Italians really aren't into those in a big way. Apart from pistachio, you can try nocciola (hazlenuts) and noce (walnuts) often

combined with chocolate or honey in the case of walnut. In Sicily where almonds are abundant, it's a very popular flavor of granita

Katy

Wow, that is a LOT of flavors and frankly, it's just scratching the surface. There is really a lot of creativity going on with gelato-making these days in terms of combinations of flavors. I say go for it! Especially if it's a seasonal flavor based on what's available at the markets. I will say though, my adventures in gelato tasting did not go so well when I tried the traditional Cipolla onion flavor in one small town in Tuscany. No worries though, you can't win them all. And I'll continue to try the interesting flavors - except Puffo - the Italian word for Smurf - yes it is bright blue and I can't even imagine how horrible it tastes. I won't even let my kids order it - sorry, kids but I know you'll love pistachio more!

Katy

But one of the best things to love about gelato is that it's open to almost every dietary restriction. If you're celiac or avoiding gluten, skip the cone and get a cup. If you're lactose intolerant go for the fruit-based flavors. Gelato is for everyone and that's why you should eat at least one, probably 2 a day when you're in Italy.

Katy

Now before you get too excited about your 2-a-day gelato habit there is a bit of gelato etiquette to know before you go - this one is especially for you first-timers and those who haven't been to Italy for a while so you don't get caught out doing the wrong thing. You'll figure it out anyway, but I just thought I'd help you along.

Katy

Firstly, when you get to the counter you are often asked to select whether you want a cone or cup, the size - how many scoops or flavors you want upfront. You pay for your gelato and then move on to the next server who you give your receipt to and then tell them the specific flavors you want. This is typical of very busy places and is actually pretty efficient.

Katy

Can you ask to try the flavors? Yes, you can. But, read the room, no one appreciates people asking for multiple tastes when the waiting line is out the door. Not the server or the other customers. If the store is empty, try asking which flavors they recommend especially in combination. They'll love to chat with you about it but like I said, if they are super busy it is not the moment for it.

Katy

As for the cost - You're looking at between €2 and €3 per scoop these days. An absolute bargain for one of the most delicious tastes you're going to have all year.

Katy

Now I bet you're wondering which gelato shops are my favorite and I will put a list into the show notes because it could go on for a while. All I will say is, don't always go for the fancy branding and slick design. On a recent food tour in Rome, we visited a family-run gelateria opposite Torre Largo Argentina which was magnificent. I would have avoided it due to the large fluorescent massive gelato sign out the front but this no-frills place offered excellent scoops. Still thinking about that actually.

Katy

You'll also find that in small towns they do excellent gelato because they basically cater for a small crowd and can pay more attention to making their flavors.

Katy

I've also added a couple of larger chain stores like Venchi and Grom to the list because they do good gelato and can be relied on if you need a gelato fix and can't find a smaller one nearby. I have to admit I love the Venchi store in Rome airport and have often grabbed a final scoop before getting on my plane home.

Katy

Now, if you're feeling inspired and are an absolute gelato fiend like me, then why not visit the Gelato Museum near Bologna? You can even make some gelato there and taste your creations, but you do need to book super early. I tried last year about three months in advance, but we missed out, so we'll go in for round two this year.

Katy

However, if you're not headed to Bologna but have some spare time in Florence, our friends at Liv Tours have an amazing gelato-making experience at Bondi, a world-renowned gelateria in the city. Don't forget you can get 5% off this and all Liv Tours experiences with code `UntoldItaly`. Another thing to keep an eye out for are gelato festivals that happen throughout the year. As usual, the websites, unfortunately, are not awesome, but we were lucky enough to book a trip a few years ago that coincided with the Gelato World Masters final in Florence, and I've got to say that was pretty epic. And there were so many tastings, too many tastings, in fact. But we tried some of the most finest gelato ever, and one of the finalists were actually Bondi, who run the gelato-making class I mentioned earlier.

Katy

So if you want to know about all the gelato flavors that you can try and the places that I really recommend going to to try gelati in Italy, head on over to the episode show notes at untolditaly.com/157 for episode 157, where we've provided links to our favorite gelato spots from Rome to Venice and beyond.

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That's all for today, next week we're heading back to Tuscany to experience life and the gorgeous countryside there slowly. But until then it's ... "ciao for now".

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