

Untold Italy Episode 163 - Pesto, Pasta and the dishes of Liguria

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 163.

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! Benvenuti, it's Katy here with another trip to one of my favorite Italian regions, through its remarkable food dishes and that's Liguria. Many of you know this region through the famous villages of the Cinque Terre but goodness it is the place where you can discover so much more including lots of colorful small towns just like those in the Cinque Terre but without thousands of other visitors. And the food there is absolutely delicious and unique and celebrates the local terrain - from the sea to the nearby hills and mountains.

Today we're celebrating the publication of my friend Enrica Manzoni's new book The flavors of Liguria where she shares her collection of favorite recipes from the region in editions in both English and Italian - she did the English translation and took the photos herself - she's so clever!

We're also announcing our new collaboration - a wonderful luxury food and wine tour of Liguria designed in collaboration with Enrica where you can experience these incredible dishes and the unique and exciting Liguria region - well off the beaten path - for yourself.

So let's dive in and hear all about the pesto, pasta, and other delicious things you can eat in Liguria.

Katy

Bentornata Enrica. Hello and welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Enrica

Hello, Katy. Thank you for having me here again.

Katy

It is so lovely to have you back on the show. I can never stop thinking about Liguria. So I'm wondering, what's been happening in your beautiful part of the world lately?

Enrica

Here in Liguria, Spring is eventually coming. The winter passed and we are enjoying nice weather and some sun. It's going to be a great new season here in Liguria for us and for me because there are great news in this part of Italy.

Katy

What's something exciting is happening for you personally, too, isn't it?

Enrica

Yes. Personally, my first Ligurian cookbook is eventually out. It is *Flavors of Liguria* is its title, and now it's ready for being purchased. It took such a long time to prepare it, and I'm very happy to eventually see it and can share this news with you. I'm really happy. This is my third baby.

Katy

Well, you should be very proud. For our listeners, Enrica has made this book out of love, not just sharing the recipes, but taking the photos, doing the translations. It really is an act of love, this book, and she's been putting a lot of work into it. Now that it's finally available, it's so exciting for you. Congratulations, Auguri! We can't wait to hear what's in the book. Now, Enrica, we chatted on the podcast several months ago now about the unique produce of Liguria. Today, to celebrate the release of your new book, which is so exciting, I thought we could talk about some of the recipes and the dishes you make with these produce, which are no doubt featured in the book. Would that be okay?

Enrica

Yes, sure. Definitely. I would be very happy to share this second stage of our review of the Ligurian cuisine and food culture. Of course, in my book, there are the main dishes of Liguria. There are about 80 recipes of the masterpieces of our Ligurian cuisine. But of course, we are not going to talk about 80 dishes. My idea is to share with you what travelers can taste when they order at restaurants. What they can find in the restaurant's menus, so the main dishes that represent our region.

Katy

Before we begin, can we understand a little bit about you, learn a little bit more about you, and how you came to write this book that's full to the brim of delicious Ligurian dishes.

Enrica

Yes. I would like to give a quick overview of the Ligurian cuisine since you cannot have an idea of the 80 recipes, but it's important for me to share some aspects of our cuisine which may not be so predictable. Our Ligurian cuisine is colorful cuisine. It is full of contrast. This is because it represents our region. Probably not everybody knows where Liguria is. Liguria is a very straight tongue of land. It's squeezed between the mountain and the seas. It's in the north, close to the France border and Tuscany. So our land is a land of contrast. We have a seaside, of course, but we have also the mountains in the back. We have a lot of woods. We have colorful villages and hidden villages in the countryside. Our cuisine is a mix, really a mix of cultures, influences, produces. This is a very complex panoramic and exploring the region and tasting these different foods is a way of understanding our culture. For example, Ligurian cuisine is fresh and fragrant.

Enrica

This is thanks to the aromatic herbs because we put aromatic herbs everywhere. Basil, of course, for making the most renowned pesto, we'll talk later on, but also marjoram, sage, rosemary, thyme. Herbs are everywhere in our cuisine. In the past, they have ennobled, the humblest dishes for centuries. So that was the way of giving flavor to very poor dishes. Ligurian cuisine is green. There are lots of vegetables and it is light because, for example, the main source of fat is extra virgin olive oil. So it's in a healthy cuisine. There are very few butter in our dishes. And this is a green cuisine based on vegetables. And it is not so much based on seafood as probably people can think about considering that this is a coastal region. But seafood is not traditionally so common. The Ligurian Sea is not that catchy. So it's a deep sea, it's stormy. So traditionally, fish was not a main source of proteins. But for small bluefishes like anchovies, which of course are very common, and tuna, and other mackerel, for example, so healthy fishes, and by the way, also sustainable. And meat. This is not a meaty cuisine because in Liguria, we have no fields for farming cow. So the consume of meat is very small, at least traditionally it was very small. And mainly we consumed small poultry and rabbits.

Enrica

Rabbit, for example, is one of the main second course we are talking later on. We have to consider really the Ligurian cuisine as a cuisine very healthy. It can be considered one of the healthiest of the Mediterranean diets because of all these different aspects.

Katy

It is so fascinating and I can tell you, so delicious. I think most travelers have actually been to Liguria, but they may not know that they've been to Liguria because they may have just dipped their toes in and visited maybe the Cinque Terre or maybe Portofino. That's probably the main places that people visit. But if you've listened to some of the other episodes that I've recorded with Enrica on the podcast, you'll understand that this is a region that stretches, as

she mentioned, from France down through to Tuscany. And it's a very beautiful region. And the cuisine is one of my favorites in Italy because it is just so varied and so very delicious. And that's why I love talking to Enrica about this. Now, let's get our bellies rumbling. Let's talk about the dishes that are in your book and also that we can taste as a travelers when we're going to Liguria.

Enrica

Okay. So let's start with what you can order as an antipasto. Please. Pasto starter. So this is usually what you order and what will fill your belly immediately because antipastos are huge. And usually, in the restaurants or in the trattorias or in traditional restaurants where I suggest you to eat as often as possible when you come to Liguria, they usually offer an antipasto misto. Antipasto misto is a mix of different small starters and you can have a taste, therefore, of different specialties. In this big plate with lots of things inside, you can have a taste of marinated anchovies. They are fresh anchovies marinated in the lemon juice, which we marinate from half days to two days, depends really on the recipes of the cook. And they are extremely fresh. I would say one of the main famous antipasto of Liguria. Then sometimes you have some slices of savory pies. Liguria is famous for their savory pies, which are shields of unleavened dough filled with a filling of vegetables mixed with the cheese, fresh herbs and eggs. They are extremely tasty and these old flavors mingle and mix perfectly. Usually, in the antipasto misto, you have a small cube and small slice of them to taste.

Enrica

And vegetables, you can have a zucchini or pumpkin or chards, swiss chards, artichokes, whatever. That's always a surprise. You never know what's there inside.

Katy

Guess it's whatever's in season, right?

Enrica

What's in season or what's traditional of the region you are visiting, of the area of the region you are visiting. Then in the antipasto misto, you can find some salami. The salami here in Liguria is Salame di Sant'Olcese, which is not the Genovese salami. It's a salami with big chunks of fat and it is usually smoked for some weeks and it's flavored with wine and garlic, so it's very good. Then if you're lucky, you can have a Focaccette Formaggio. Focaccette al Formaggio are fritters filled with creamy melting cheese. They are amazing.

Katy

I think I would just order just keep ordering those. That sounds pretty amazing. I like a mixture of things. I love to be able to taste a mixture of things. Sometimes I think if you go for one dish, you're feeling like you're committing to that one dish. If you don't like it, you're

like, Oh, I don't know. But if you have a plate and you can taste lots of different things, well, the good news is I've discovered in Liguria that basically it's pretty much all delicious. So you don't have a problem anyway, so go ahead and order that. So Enrica, what about the pasta? Are there some delicious pasta dishes in Liguria?

Enrica

Yes, of course. I would mention three pasta dishes that you can find and you can have to taste. First of all, pesto. Pasta with pesto. Pesto is world wide known. It's the basil sauce made with basil, parmesan cheese, and garlic, and pinenuts and oil. Pesto is the flagship of Ligurian cuisine and you can taste it in different ways. So you can find Trofie al pesto, which are a tiny, curly, fresh pasta, seasoned with pesto. You can find Gnocchi al pesto, which are made with potatoes, gnocchi potatoes with pesto. Or if you are in Genoa or it's close to Genova, and if you're lucky enough, you can also find Mandilli de Sea al pesto. They are very, very old recipes, but I think that is definitely my favorite way of eating pesto. And they are lasagnas, huge squares of thin lasagnas, seasoned with the pesto. And they cook lasagna one after the other, and they put pesto in between one lasagna and the other. They are called Mandilli de Sea al pesto because in dialect, that means silk handkerchiefs. So they look like silk handkerchiefs, seasoned with pesto. And for me, they are the best way of eating pesto ever.

Katy

Well, I'm coming to Liguria in March, and so you need to take me to get those silk handkerchief because I need to try that lasagne, please. Can we arrange that?

Enrica

Yes.

Katy

Great.

Enrica

Otherwise, you will come to my place and I will cook them for you.

Katy

Okay, that's okay then, too. Thank you.

Enrica

Okay. Then we have two stuffed pastas, two ravioli. The first, the Ravioli Genovesi, which are ravioli stuffed with meat and vegetables. And they usually are seasoned with a meat sauce.

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Don't call it ragu, don't call it bologna sauce. That is Tocco. Tocco means a big piece of meat because this meat sauce is made out of a big piece of meat which is slow cooked for even more than three hours and it releases all the juices. And it's a velvety, clear sauce, very, very tasty. And you season ravioli with that. You will find them everywhere and they are fantastic.

Enrica

For a vegetarian version, because in Liguria, we love vegetarian food, we love vegetarian people, we have the Pansotti with walnut sauce. Pansotti are bell shaped filled pasta. They look like big tortellini. And the filling inside is made of wild herbs and very few cheese. So they are green inside, dark green inside. And it's a traditional seasoning is walnut sauce. It's a very easy to make sauce, made blending walnuts with some parmesan cheese, oil, marjoram, and some stale bread mopped in milk. And you have this fantastic creamy sauce. Looks like there is cream inside, though there is no cream inside, so that's fantastic. But something with walnut sauce. It's something that you can find in the countryside rather than on the sea coast, because it's very rustic and peasant recipe.

Katy

But if you see it, we should order it. Is that what you're saying? It sounds like if you see it on the menu, always order it.

Enrica

Yes. Consider that if you find a nice Osteria or Trattoria, you can also ask for a mix primi. You can ask to have a half a portion of one and half a portion of the other. You can taste the different dishes. Usually, they do that.

Katy

Mind blown. I didn't know you could do that. Well, how would you actually ask that in Italian? I think we all need to know. I had no idea you could do that.

Enrica

Posso avere un assaggio di entrambi?. Don't be shy, ask. Ask for a taste thing.

Katy

Amazing.

Enrica

After the Primi, the first course, we can move to the main courses. As I said, Ligurian cuisine is not so meaty, so I would like to give you some ideas of different main course you can have on different days. So if you want to order meat, you love meat. If you find in the menu, go for

rabbit. Rabbit Ligurian style, Coniglio alla Ligure. It's the rabbit stewed with olives. Our olive are Taggiasca olive, which are very, very tasty, and lots of pine nuts and a lot of aromatic herbs. Everything poured in white wine. The white wine or red wine? It really depends on the region. So if you go in the West, it's red wine. If you go in the East, it's white wine. So it really depends. But you can find rabbit everywhere and this is something very iconic. So go for that rather than with other meat dishes.

Enrica

Then if you have to order a seafood dish, any menu in any restaurant, you find Cappon magro. Cappon magro is a traditional seafood salad. It's really the seafood salad that we prepare for celebrations for Christmas, for New Eve, because this is a sumptuous salad made of layers of vegetables and white fish. In between one layer and the other, there is a green sauce made of parsley. This is amazing. Usually, there are also prawns and oysters, and mussels, everything to decorate and make this salad even more sumptuous and majestic. You can find it also as an antipasto. Usually, sometimes they offer it as a starter. Nothing prevents you to order it as a main course because it's a big salad.

Katy

That is my dream. That's the sort of thing that I really love. And that's in our family, that's how we celebrate. Everything is really with seafood. So we're going to need to get your book to get this recipe with a parsley sauce. Amazing.

Enrica

Amazing. Yes, it's delicious. And there is, of course, the recipe in my book. Then - main courses made of vegetables because here in Liguria, we are famous for stuffing vegetables, for using vegetables as main ingredients for healthy but at the same time, hearty dishes. You can order a polpettone. Polpettone is a tart made of green beans and potatoes. It's a casserole. It's mashed green beans and potatoes and parmesan cheese and herbs, everything mixed together and cooked in the oven. It's very good.

Enrica

Or otherwise, we have stuffed vegetables. So we have stuffed vegetables, which are shells made of the vegetables with the stuffing inside, made of vegetables as well, mixed with some potatoes, some herbs, and cheese, and then everything baked in the oven. They are fantastic. They have this mix of flavors and they are so light and tasty. So this is a very good vegetarian main course. There are many others.

Katy

I can imagine. It can sell a very creative use of lots of different ingredients. So Enrica, is there any rice in Ligurian cuisine or is it mainly potatoes is the main starchy ingredient?

Enrica

Potatoes is the main starchy ingredient and pasta, of course, but not as an ingredient. Rice is not so common because we have no rice plantation, of course, in our region. So the rice that we use is something that we learn to use from the Muslims for the trade with North Italy. There are some recipes. For example, we have Torta di riso, rice pie, which is very famous. It's a pie made of rice and cheese and eggs, which is very good. Few recipes with rice, like Riso a rosto, which is rice roast, like Arroz Seco, the Spanish one. And we have some risottos with the octopus, for example. But rice is not so common in our world, you see.

Katy

I was just wondering, because obviously, as you go north, like in Lombardy is not so far from you, that they have quite a few rice dishes there. So that's interesting. And obviously, the terrain is going to define what's available. And if I thought about it a little bit harder, I would have realized that the terrain wasn't very good for rice. It's a new way.

Enrica

We have no plains for rice. And then what to say? So we have arrived almost at the end of this huge banquet and we can order some dessert, maybe. Always. Always dessert. Okay. If you're in the west of the Italian riviera, which is part of Liguria, I love and really love, which is not so touristic, so it's still very authentic. And the dishes, as well are very good. And you can find a lot of variety of different and local traditional dishes.

Enrica

And there you can find Stroschia di Pietrabruna, which is an extra virgin olive oil cake, West Liguria is famous for its oil production, extra virgin olive oil production. And this cake is a crumbly cake. It's vegan also because there is no butter inside it. It's just oil and flour and sugar and some lemon peel. It's so good. Usually, they serve it with some ice cream.

Enrica

Otherwise, you can ask for some cookies, local cookies like a canistrelli, which has a flower shape with a hole inside. They are shortbread cookies, very traditional of the backcountry of Genoa, but they produce it everywhere. Or otherwise, we have gobeletti, which are shortbread tartelette with jam inside. They are very good.

Enrica

And then if it is wintertime, probably you can order a slice of Pan Dolce, which we mentioned in a Christmas episode with you some time ago. Pan dulce is a sweet bread enriched with nuts, raisin, and candied orange peels. It's very good. This is our traditional Christmas cake, but they prepare it all year round actually. Or if it is winter, castagnaccio e lse. Castagnaccio

is a tart made with chestnut flour and pine nuts and raisin. It's like a big Pan cake made with chestnut flour. It's very common, especially in the countryside, where there are lots of chestnut trees. So it's very common there.

Katy

Amazing.

Enrica

And that's it. And then we have an Amaro. We need to digest everything with the coffee and with an amaro, of course, which is a bitter liquor to help digesting all this wonderful meal.

Katy

And is that made from the local herbs as well?

Enrica

There are many amaro makers here in Liguria, and now they tend to use local herbs for flavoring it. So always ask for a local Amaro. That would be the best way to seal this meal.

Katy

Amazing. I can't wait to get back to Liguria because it's just so good. When I'm listening to you talk about the cuisine, and it sounds like it would be very suitable not only for vegetarians, but it's probably not as difficult to cater for vegans. Would I be right? If you're vegan, you could eat quite easily at a restaurant.

Enrica

Well, if you are vegan, you can have options at the restaurant. You can ask, for example, for a Minestrone, which is our vegetable soup, which is very, very dense. Lots of vegetables, low cook for a very long time, and the flavor with some pesto, but you can skip the pesto because sometimes there is parmesan - there is parmesan in pesto. But there are legumes inside. So that's a very complete dish for vegan.

Enrica

There is farinata. Farinata is our traditional chickpea tart and it's made just with the chickpea flour, water, and salt. So that's vegan as well. And you can have it as a main course or as a starter. And all the salads made with bread and tomatoes, we call it Cundigiun. It's like a panzanella, but it is our traditional local tomato salad. And also this is full of vegetables and there is bread inside. So you season it with lots of oil. So that's another good vegan option. So you can always find vegan food in the restaurants because it's pretty vegetarian cuisine.

Katy

And that's actually, compared with some of the other regions, it's quite unusual actually. So I think if you are really vegetarian, like I'm not vegetarian, I eat meat and seafood, but I do love eating a lot of vegetable dishes. And I think it's one of the reasons why I really love Ligurian cuisine, because some things that you just don't expect, all these delicious herbs and flavors that come from herbs that are just growing wild. And one thing I learned from Enrica in an earlier episode was that the basil that's used in pesto is very different from probably the ones that we get at home, which is why it tastes so delicious when you're there. And it's very difficult to get that basil abroad. So definitely make sure you explore the pesto while you're in Liguria, because it is so delicious.

Enrica

You can find the seeds and try to plant them in your garden in your country because the variety is different, really. The seeds variety are different. But what makes our basil incredible is, of course, the soil and the sea breeze because it's harvested on the seaside, mostly on the hills facing the seaside. So of course, the climate really affected the basil.

Katy

Enrica, I've got a sneaky plan for these listeners of ours that may only be going to the Cinque Terre. Shame on them - they need to go a little bit further. But if they can only go to the Cinque Terre on this trip and they must try some of this cuisine, are there any places that you would recommend in the villages for them to try true traditional Ligurian cuisine?

Enrica

Good question. Because in Cinque Terre, it's difficult to find a restaurant that really makes real traditional cuisine. Though, there are a couple that I feel really safe to suggest to you and to your listeners. One is Gianni Franzini in Vernazza, and the restaurant is fantastic because it's in the main square of Vernazza in front of the sea. And it's one of the oldest restaurants in Cinque Terre. So they keep on going and making the traditional cuisine since decades. So they are an institution.

Enrica

Otherwise, there is another charming, fantastic place I've been visiting years ago, and its name is quite difficult to say it's *Ittiturismo Corniglia Sp4488*. Okay, this is a wild name because *Ittiturismo* means a restaurant that cook the very same fish that they have caught with their fish boat. So the fish that you eat is the catch of the day. And the name is difficult because *SP 4488* is the registered name of their vessel. But this place is a fantastic place in Corniglia. Corniglia is one of the villages which is not on the seaside. It's the only one on the mountainside. And this place is an open restaurant facing Corniglia and the sea on the hills. So you have a wonderful view of the seas, silence, olive trees everywhere, and the sky and the sea and the sea, and the sand, and the freshest fish ever. So it's really a paradise,

especially if you go there in the touristic season. So you can get to Cinque Terre before May and after September. That is really paradise.

Katy

Well, Enrica, I'm very hungry now, even though I have already eaten a bowl of pesto pasta today. So do you want to give us a summary of all those dishes and let us know, all of our listeners, know how they can stay in touch with you and how they can do one of your amazing cooking classes and also definitely buy your new book?

Enrica

Thank you for asking. Okay. Your listeners can order and buy my book. If they are in the US, they will find it on Amazon. And if they are in Europe, they can find them on my website. Of course, there is a website, there is a book page. And then also, if they want to have a food experience here in Genoa, they can get in touch with me through my website, which is asmallkitcheningenoa.com, where they can find my cooking classes and the food tours and travel consultancy to organize food travel here in Liguria.

Katy

Amazing. The name of the book is Flavor of Liguria, right?

Enrica

Ligurian cucina - Flavor of Liguria. It is in Italian and in English. So if someone wants to practice their Italian, they have the translation into Italian as well - of the recipes.

Katy

You're so clever. I love it. Italian and English. She's taken most of the photos and she's done the recipes. Amazing. Thank you for joining us.

Enrica

I wait for you here.

Katy

I am coming, as you know, very soon. I'm going to give you a big hug and we're going to take a photo with us and the book. So everyone can see this magnificent work of art that you've done. So Auguri, congratulations. I think everyone should go out and definitely try some of these recipes because so delicious. I've got that seafood one bookmarked myself.

Enrica

Thank you, Katy. Ciao.

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Enrica

Ciao.

Katy

Everyone I know wishes they had spent more time in Liguria and I'm certainly one of them. That's why I'm going to Genoa to explore and meet Enrica in person for the first time in a few weeks and taste my way around that wonderful city.

I'm so excited to congratulate her personally on the incredible achievement of publishing her book of recipes and photos in English and Italian. It's truly something to celebrate because book publication is already difficult but for a woman to do this in Italy in both languages truly speaks to Enrica's dedication, passion, and focus.

I'm so inspired by her and absolutely thrilled she's helped us create our Untold Italy food and wine tour of Liguria. The first trip is departing in October this year and there are only 10 spots available. Of course, you will meet Enrica and she'll show you how to cook some of the region's famous dishes but only after you've discovered the local production of basil, the intense and beautiful relationship with olive oil, and the hidden colorful towns that everyone misses when they focus on the Cinque Terre

You'll find links to Enrica's website and where you can purchase her book *The Flavors of Liguria* plus all the details of our food and wine tour of Liguria in the episode show notes at untolditaly.com/163.

Thanks for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. We truly appreciate all of you, our listeners joining us from around the world. We'd love it if you helped spread the word so we can reach more Italy-loving travelers just like you. And the best way you can do this is by leaving us a 5-star rating or review on your favorite podcast app or forwarding this episode onto a friend who also loves colorful towns, delightful local customs, and the magic of regional Italy.

That's all for today, next week we'll take another dip into the magic of the Italy... "ciao for now".