

Untold Italy Episode 169 - Rome restaurants

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 169.

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 friends. I hope you're well and ready to learn about finding great restaurants in Rome! Most Italian journeys include some time in the Eternal City and unfortunately it's a place where you'll find some tourist traps and places that serve dishes that make you cry into your spaghetti - and not in a good way!

Today I'm joined by my friend, former chef and Roman food expert Nesim Bekalti who runs [Full Belly Food Tours](#) in Rome. I met Nesim back at the end of 2019 when everyone was having a lot of fun, without a care in the world. He had some big plans back then but I think we all know what got in the way.

We recently reconnected and I'm happy to say this story has a happy continuation. Nesim is going to give you some tips on finding the best places to eat in Rome and also share his opinion on those popular places where they twirl your pasta in front of you in a big wheel of parmigiano reggiano cheese - spoiler alert.. that really made me laugh.

Anyway, let's dive in.

Katy

Benvenuto Nesim. Ciao and welcome to the Untold Italy podcast.

Nesim

Hey, Katy, thank you so much for having me.

Katy

Oh, yey, you're finally here on the podcast. I'm so happy to have you dialing in from Rome. I've explained to our listeners how we met in those crazy days of 2019 before COVID. But things have changed for you a bit since then. So why don't you share your story in your own words?

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Nesim

I was working as a food tour guide when we met working for another tour operator. And then 2020 happened and there was no work. So then when things started picking back up again, I started working for another tour operator who was doing historical golf cart tours and they weren't offering food tours at the time. And the owner is the friend of a good friend of mine. And so they sent me about 40 people at the end of 2021 looking to book food tours. And that's when I got a taste of what it was like to do my own itineraries, choose what and where we have. And that was really the push to start Full Belly Tours. Best decision I ever made because I come from a cooking background and I'd hear people say, if you do what you love in life, you don't work a day in your life. That kind of applies to kitchens, but it's very high-pressure, physically taxing, stressful work, so you still feel like you're working. Whereas with this, I really can't believe that this is what I do for work. I get to meet cool people from all over the world that are interested in food and want to book a food tour. And if that's who you are, chances are you're a fun person. So I just get to talk incessantly about food and drink, which is what I do on my own time. And yeah, I can't believe my luck.

Katy

It's amazing. Well, we had so much fun on your tour back in the day. But now, Nesim is not your typical Italian name. So what's your background?

Nesim

Right. So my father is from Tunisia. Nesim is actually an Arabic name. It means 'the breeze' in classical Arabic. My mom is French, raised in the US. I was born in Washington DC and raised here in Rome. When I was nine months old, my parents moved back to Rome, and this is where I grew up. I'm both a foreigner and Roman simultaneously. When I speak Italian, I have a thick Roman accent whenever I meet Italians traveling the world, the first thing they say is, ah Romano! Which is a point of pride for me. Plus, I've traveled the world working in restaurants most of my life. I realized when I was finishing high school, my passions in life were cooking and traveling. And then if I became a cook, it would pay me to travel the world. So I did that for about 20 years and got to understand different cultures, sensibilities and sensitivities. So coming back here qualifies me. I have this unique skill set where I can relate to people from all over the world while relating to locals because Romans love Romans. And so I helped bridge the gap between the various cultures while keeping it entertaining.

Nesim

And I realized, as I said, from a very early age, that food was my passion. So I ended up finishing my studies in hotel and tourism management. And I basically worked in hospitality my whole life because I just love working with people, taking care of them, especially in relation to food. If I see that my guests are having a good time, that makes my job worthwhile. And I feel a little less guilty for the job that I do.

Katy

No, you shouldn't feel guilty. We had such a great time. I would never forget that night. We really did have a brilliant time. And the thing that I really appreciated is that you were able to switch things up because I was traveling (for the listeners) I was traveling with a friend of mine, and we both know a little bit more than the average about food and wine. Nesim was really great in showing us around his neighborhood, which is Testaccio and also just all the great little corners there. But I'm sure you've got better ones to show people these days now you're running your own show. But he also knows everyone there.

Nesim

Yeah, it's special. I offer tours in Trastevere, I do Testaccio, I also do custom tours. But when people ask me, I tend to recommend Testaccio because for one, it's a very important neighborhood to Rome, specifically when dealing with food. In ancient Rome, it was the neighborhood where it was like the warehouse district, where all of the food that was brought in from the four corners of the Roman Empire was stored before redistributing it locally. And present day, Testaccio gave birth to what we know as traditional Roman cuisine. So it's a dining destination for all Romans. They come here specifically to eat. And I both grew up here and currently live here. And so the places that we visit on tour are the places that I go to eat and shop at on a daily basis. And they're basically the best of the best because they're the best places in the best neighborhood in Rome to eat. The fact that I go there on my own when we visit it together, it's basically like visiting friends. There's lots of hugging and kissing and joking. So yeah, it's lots of fun for everyone involved.

Katy

Oh, it's so much fun. And it's so great to explore a city with a local and especially the food scene. And I think, let's dive in. Let's help everyone learn about restaurants in Rome and learn how to spot a good one and how to spot one that's maybe not so good. We know we need to go to Testaccio, but then let's broaden it out a bit. And I think the first thing that people get a bit confused about is there's so many different types of Italian restaurants. You've got your Trattorias, you've got Osterias, what's going on with that? Tell us about it.

Nesim

There's three main categories of Italian restaurants. You have Trattoria, Osteria, and Ristorante, and that level of fanciness. A trattoria is your entry level, no fuss, and they don't care about plating. It's just good home-cooked style food, stick-to-your-ribs, paper tablecloth, not particularly attentive service, which are all good things here. An osteria is kind of a step up. It's a slightly fancier trattoria. It's a midway point between a trattoria and a ristorante. But osteria initially started out as our local watering holes. The name osteria comes from the Italian word 'osti', which means host. So you're being hosted to have a good time. And you would basically go there and hang out with your buddies and drink wine, maybe have some bread and cheese. Maybe they had cooked one dish for the day. But it was basically like the

local pub, especially because back then, we're talking over 100 years ago, people didn't necessarily have plumbing, running water. Living rooms were not a thing. You had multiple generations of families living in very cramped quarters. So the osteria was where you would go and drink your worries away and have fun and relax. I don't know how the Osteria became what it is now, but it's now, as I said, the synonym for a slightly fancier trattoria.

Nesim

Now, it is also a fairly nebulous term because, for example, the best restaurant or what is widely acclaimed to be the best restaurant in Italy is called Osteria Franciscana. It's a three-star Michelin and it's run by the chef Massimo Bottura. Word to the wise, just because it says Osteria doesn't necessarily mean that it's not super fancy, but it's normally going to be less fancy than a ristorante, which is going to be a more formal setting. Normally, white tablecloth, the waiters are going to be wearing what I call Penguin suits, like the three-piece with the tie, and this is an over generalization. But I find the best food in this country tends to sit at the trattoria and osteria levels. When Italians start fussing with food and plating on larger plates with squiggles of sauce and plating vertically and tweels and this stuff, they lose that magical soul-satisfying quality that the classics tend to have. So when in doubt, I always go for a trattoria and osteria. The more rustic it looks, the better. I always say if it looks like they haven't renovated the place in over 70 years, then that's a very good sign and go for that. Because once again, over generalization, but Italians that make food tend to normally focus either on what the food tastes like or on what the food and or the place look like. So when in doubt, do not go for the place with all the bells and whistles. It means they're normally focusing on the wrong thing.

Katy

So what are you saying? They can't focus on two things at once?

Nesim

Your words, not mine. No, they seem to have one main focus. And so if that focus is on food and they make really good food, then they don't feel the need to gussy it up because it's delicious. So just eat and don't bother me. So if they're worrying about that stuff, it's not necessarily a bad sign, but it could very well be.

Katy

Right. And Nesim and I were talking offline before about marketing and how marketing is not the strongest point. So this is why if they're focusing on the food, the chances of them having a website is probably quite slim.

Nesim

Yes

Katy

And you're not going to find these places on Google, sorry, friends. But you might if you know what you're searching for, but you probably don't know what you're searching for. This is why it's really important to get these top tips of how to find these really great authentic cuisine places, because otherwise, you could end up in a bit of trouble.

Nesim

Absolutely. For example, as we were discussing previously, it's considered a legitimate online presence here for a business to have a Facebook page instead of a website. And that's already more than what a lot of these places have. As you said, many places, you look them up and there is no online presence. So if you see a Facebook page for a restaurant, that's not suspicious. In their mind, it's just as good as having a website. And word to the wise, if you're trying to call an Italian business, any Italian business, and they don't answer their phone, it by no means implies that they're closed. There's just a different approach to customer service here. The way I put it is in Italy, the customer is rarely right. And so if no one answers the phone, try, try again, or maybe just go show up in person, and chances are they'll be there.

Katy

So good. I love it. We're talking about Rome specifically because most people's trips begin and end in Rome, or they have spent some time in Rome. And sometimes you can luck out. And then there's all these places that have done a pretty good job of their own marketing, shall we say. But what we're trying to do in this episode is look for where we're going to find the good stuff. I mentioned there's a very famous sandwich shop that's just opened up behind the Pantheon. It's called All'Antico Vinaio. And it's really fascinating because this is a sandwich shop from Florence. And it's very famous on Instagram for very, very large sandwiches, which I don't know how I could feed a family of four, and everyone's wanting to line up. So would you have Romans line up for their sandwiches, Nesim?

Nesim

For one, we don't really queue. And if we do, we don't do so in orderly fashion. We congregate in a large mass outside of the dining establishment, trying to elbow past or get our way in or catch the eye of the person. One of the red flags for places that maybe us locals don't visit is if you see a very orderly, very long queue of people, especially if the people waiting in that line do not look like locals. I have no idea how All'Antico Vinaio got that popular. I mean, they must have an amazing marketing team. I did try the sandwiches. They are good. I wouldn't necessarily wait hours in line for one, especially since Italian food is super regional. I wouldn't necessarily spend hours in Rome waiting online for food that isn't from here because I've never tried All'Antico Vinaio in Florence, but I would guess that it's slightly better because that's how this country works. Italy has hundreds, not say thousands of culinary microcosms, and you should be eating what is most famous there specifically. So for

one, having Tuscan things in Rome or any regional cuisine outside of traditional Roman one, in Rome, it won't be as good as it is at the source.

Nesim

So you should focus on the local classics no matter where it is in this country you're traveling. And this is true for most countries and cultures. Food is regional, but Italy, much more so than most, because one thing that most people don't realize is that Italy is a fairly recent country. It was unified as a Republic in the 1860s, if I remember correctly. Prior to that, Italy was a bunch of independent city-states that were often at war with each other and didn't necessarily trade, especially food. You had to be very wealthy to bring in food from other parts of the country, so clergy or nobility. That's why every 10, 15 kilometers, miles, you have new pasta shapes, cheeses, wines, cold cuts. And it's what makes this country so much fun to travel culinarily. Also makes it a little dangerous on the waistline, but it's a small price to pay.

Katy

It is a small price to pay. And I think what I love now is that they used to fight about land and castles and all of that. Now they just fight about who's pasta is better.

Nesim

Absolutely. And no matter where you are in this country, they'll tell you that the other regions are wrong. It's one of the great things about this place. you know, I'll - on tour, I may tell you all sorts of stuff, and then you'll go up to Bologna and they'll be like, "Oh, that Roman guy has no idea what he's talking about, this is the actual truth". Now, what's great is as long as you listen to the locals, you'll have the best possible local experience. And that's what matters most.

Katy

Yeah, right. So well, most people, when they visit Rome, they'll stay in the central historical, so stay in the old part of town. And they might venture to Trastevere, which is becoming very popular. Yes. However, are these the best neighborhoods to maybe find traditional Roman cuisine, or do we need to go a little bit further?

Nesim

Given the crazy number of visitors that we get every year, there are unfortunately a lot of tourist traps where people prey on visitors who may think, I'm in Italy, everything is going to be good here. That applies to anywhere where there aren't crowds or tourists. So any small town you venture into, anywhere in this country, you'll eat really good because it's basically Italians cooking for other Italians. It's only when you have the anonymity of the masses or when they're cooking for visitors that they'll start using lower-quality ingredients. Maybe it'll be people that don't necessarily know how to cook. So in Rome, which is possibly the hardest

place to find good food in the city, also because of the size of the city. Rome is the largest city by far. The next nine largest cities in Italy fit within the circumference of Rome, which also makes it harder to navigate as far as food goes. So what I recommend is if you're going to the Vatican, if you're going to the Colosseum, if you're going to see any of the dozens of spectacular things we have in the city, have breakfast before heading out there, and then maybe do a little research and plan to travel to a close by neighborhood to eat.

Nesim

So there's a number of red flags that I talk about on tour to spot and avoid tourist traps. One of them is you need to walk a minimum of five blocks from the closest touristic attraction before you start looking for food. And the larger and more important the attraction, the further away you need to walk. If you are within walking range to St Peter's, chances are that's not a good place to look for food. There are small places that have managed to survive, but for the most part, it is tourist traps. The other day I was driving by and I drove by this packed place whose name was Pasta Pizza Souvenirs. That's obviously the place that you should avoid like the plague. Now, rather than a specific neighborhood to go to (even though Testaccio is one of the most popular to eat) it's mostly about avoiding these super crowded areas. Now, there's also visual queues that you can use to see if places are tourist traps or not. So I'll run through the red flags. My favorite is the display table. It's this sad little table outside of the restaurant, normally with a pizza and a plate of pasta shriveling in the sunlight, being pecked at by random pigeons. The more authentic ingredients, and I'm doing air quotes as I say that, you see on that table, the more you should worry. Piles of dried pasta, clusters of grapes or cherry tomatoes, reefs of garlic or chillies. My favorite is the fiasco, the fat bottomed bottle of wine with a straw basket on the bottom. That's the bottle that Chianti used to be served in decades ago. No one uses them anymore. Chianti is just sold in regular wine bottles nowadays. So if you see that one, run.

Nesim

Near the display table, there's often what we call accalappiacani - the catcher. That's the person outside waving a menu in your face going, My friend, Deutsche? Francais? Espanol? You just smile and keep walking or scowl and keep walking. I put on my thickest Roman accent and I say, "no, I'm from Rome". Thank you very much. One guy once said, What? Romans don't eat? And I said, "Not there, we don't". And he scurried away in shame.

Nesim

The menu can also tell you a lot. So an enlarged menu sitting outside of the restaurant is very suspicious, especially if that enlarged menu has pictures. Pictures you should never find on Italian menus. It's something that here they use mostly for ethnic cuisine, I think in part because a lot of Italians aren't necessarily familiar with lots of ethnic cuisine. But you never want pictures on Italian menus.

Nesim

Also, and this has gotten me a lot of flack on various travel groups that I may have posted this on, but any mention of Gluten-free and lactose-free is not necessarily... I'm just going to say it, it's not a good sign. Italians don't cater particularly well or willingly to special dietary needs. They'll do so if they have to, but they don't want to, so they'll never advertise that they do. So any place that does is not catering to locals, which in and of itself is not that good a sign. Now, I will say that I am gluten intolerant. I eat pasta and pizza anyway because it's delicious. I just try to reduce my intake of it. So I'm not saying that it's not a thing. I'm not saying Celiac people don't exist. I'm not saying Italians do not acknowledge this. I'm just saying that they normally don't advertise it. Also, because I secretly feel that most Italians feel that this gluten-free stuff is like foreign propaganda because how could pizza and pasta be bad for you?

Nesim

And I am going a little off topic here, but for example, if you need to find gluten-free products in Italy, you won't find them at the supermarket. You'll find them in the pharmacy. And if your doctor diagnoses you as having Celiac disease, the government gives you €140 a month to spend on gluten-free products.

Katy

Wow.

Nesim

I think maybe it's because they feel bad that you can't have the real stuff. But you can still eat really well if you're on gluten intolerant. Absolutely. This is the thing is I think people are really focused on pizza and pasta, and they don't have to because there's plenty of delicious dishes that don't include gluten. And if you are gluten intolerant, maybe it's the thing that you need to do is actually investigate those dishes that don't include pollutant products. And that's why it's always good to hang out with a local because they'll be able to tell you.

Nesim

And it is true that most trattorio, osteria restaurants, especially that are used to working with visitors, normally do have gluten-free pasta on premises. They just don't advertise that they do. So if there's a place that you really want to visit, give them a call and ask them if they do, and chances are they will. It's something that is more and more recognized. People will cater to it. It's just the advertising of it is sometimes questionable.

Katy

Now, let's just circle back to the menu bit because if you're going to avoid every single restaurant that has a menu at the front, you might not eat because by law you have to have a menu, like a small menu.

Nesim

Very good point. A menu that is just printed on a white sheet of paper with no pictures on the wall or even on a little tripod or something, that's normal. That's actually fine. Anything that's large, eye-catching and pictures, that's the main thing to worry about.

Katy

Laminated?

Nesim

Yes.

Katy

With the plastic on the front?

Nesim

Yes, absolutely. With possibly a light clip to the top of it so it can shine down even in the wee hours. There's also the number of languages present on the menu will give you a good indication. Ideally, you're hoping for just Italian, Italian and one, possibly even two other languages can be acceptable. But any more than that, especially if you see other alphabets, highly questionable. Because if you see other alphabets, it normally means that they're catering to large tour groups, often unloaded by the busload, in which case they really don't care what they're cooking because they see it as you're here once and then you're off and we don't need to worry about anything further.

Katy

Yeah, you're never coming back. Yeah, exactly. A good place to see this in action is Piazza Navona, isn't it?

Katy

Absolutely. I mean, it's a bit unfortunate because really, if you have a view that beautiful, you should be delivering some amazing food. But like Nesim mentioned before, we're focusing on one thing at a time. We've got either the beautiful view and the beautiful restaurant or the incredible food. It's such a shame about Piazza Navona. I'd love someone with a great idea to go and set up there and just smash it. But actually, I went to a really good bakery behind

there, the Cinque Lune. I don't know if you know that one. I had a very nice Maritozzo from that bakery.

Nesim

Oh, no. I'll be sure to check it out.

Katy

Yeah, it's a tiny little hole-in-the-wall place. I was surprised. It was a hangry moment. There were some children that needed some food. We popped in and grabbed this Maritozzo, and it was freshly... The cream was freshly put inside the delicious bun.

Nesim

I love Maritozzi so much. I will be sure to check it out.

Nesim

Yeah. So unfortunately, it is very hard to eat in the more crowded areas, the areas that have more of a historical draw, which was not the case when I was growing up. When I was growing up, you could eat virtually anywhere in the city and you would find really good trattoria. I think it has in part to do with rents going up and the more visitors come, the easier it is to run a tourist trap, and they edged out the smaller places. And you mentioned Trastevere before. Trastevere was actually like my stomping grounds as a teen. That's where I hung out most after school on the weekends. And it was a very local neighborhood. Since it's one of the most historic neighborhoods in Rome, it was where the first Jews and Christians were sent to live around the second century AD, before Christianity was legal in ancient Rome. It's now getting more and more visitors. And the same thing is happening. A lot of these small local trattoria are being replaced by very popular tourist trappy places. In fact, the two most popular places in Trastevere have really long lines and they're both tourist traps.

Nesim

Actually, pasta that is served to you in a little pan is also not necessarily the best serving option, let's say. Especially if that pan seems like it's never seen a flame, let's say that that's gimmicky as well.

Katy

What about the pasta when they get the big wheel of Parmigiano Reggiano and they...

Nesim

I have a couple of issues with that. For one, it's not something that locals really do. There's also, just coming from a cook's perspective, a health and safety side to it. You're using the

same wheel of cheese that's just sitting out in the dining room over and over and over and over and over. Where's that kept at night? Do they even put it in the fridge? So that's the cook side of me that comes out more. But let's just say that I've never eaten in a place that has done that. Not because I refuse to go to places that do it, but all of the places that I've gone to my whole life going here have never done it. Now, there are some places that will do... So the step of mixing the pasta with the sauce is called 'mantecatura'. That's normally done by the cook in the kitchen. And so in this case, they're doing the mantecatura in the cheese wheel. There are restaurants that will do the mantecatura for you table side. They just do it in the bowl. So one of my favorite places in the neighborhood is called Da Felice. It's definitely one of the most famous places in the city. It's really hard to get a table. It's one of those places where you can call for weeks on end and they never answer. But they will do the mantecatura for you for two specific pasta dishes, cacio e pepe, which is one of Rome's most iconic pasta dishes. The name means cheese and pepper. There's only four ingredients, pasta, Pecorino Romano, which is basically our sheep's milk equivalent of Parmigiano, black pepper, and the cooking water from the pasta. And the waiter will come out with a large bowl of Tonnarelli, which is our favorite fresh egg pasta. It's like a squared spaghetti shape that originally hails from Abruzzo, but we adopted it as our favorite egg pasta. With lots of grated pecorino on top, some cracked black pepper, and then under there's a little bit of cooking water that you don't see. They set the bowl down in front of you, grab your fork and your spoon, and they start doing the mantecatura. They start mixing it really quickly and you see it come together from these four disjointed ingredients into this lovely, creamy, luscious sauce right before your eyes. So that when they do the mantecatura for your table side, that's great.

Nesim

But the cheese wheel? I'm somewhat on the fence about.

Katy

All right. Well, we've been a little bit negative, Nesim. So let's just... And that's not really us, is it? Let's face it.

Nesim

Absolutely not.

Katy

No, we're all on the positive side of things. So let's look for what are we looking for? What are we looking for looking for? We know that they're not fancy. We know they don't have a big menu at the front.

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Nesim

Correct. So you're looking for anything, what comes to mind is to say anything that looks local. But I guess if you're not from here, that doesn't mean much. So let me elaborate. You want to find a place that looks like it hasn't been renovated anytime recently. Look at the clientele. There have to be at least some locals eating there. And obviously, the more locals, the better. Look at the size of the menu. And this applies to any eatery anywhere on this planet. The more dishes you have, the higher the chances you have of there being ingredients in a freezer somewhere or possibly things that have been bought in ready-made. Whereas if you have a very small concise menu, it basically guarantees that they're making everything in-house and everything that they're making in-house is fresh. Mind you, this also goes for gelateria. So there's a gelateria behind the Pantheon, whose claimed to fame is 150 flavors. That's something I would shy away from looking more for your little gelateria that has maybe 20 or a dozen or something around that.

Nesim

What are the things to look for? Go down the little alleys, even if you are in the dead center or near St Peter's or near the Colosseum. Get lost down the little alleys. It's actually one of the best ways to enjoy the city. And that's where you'll find small local trattoria that are still around and serve the communities that live around the Colosseum, St Peter's and such.

Katy

Great tips. You're right. And you need to be a little bit adventurous. I do have some favorite places, and I think I'm guilty of selling them out. But it's really great to just take a little bit of a step further into Testaccio, where Nesim lives. It's an amazing area, and they've got a market there and traditional restaurants. Yeah.

Nesim

So one of the great things about Testaccio is we don't appear on tourist maps. Tourist maps cut off at the Tiber River directly above Testaccio. So most visitors don't even know we exist, yet we're walking distance to all the most desirable parts of town. The fact that we don't appear on tourist maps means that you don't get a lot of tourist foot traffic, which means that there are no tourist traps. And so all of the places in Testaccio you can eat well in far better than your average trattoria in these highly trafficked areas. Now, like any neighborhood in the world, within these places, there are the nicer ones or the better ones, which is why you should come on tour with me. I'll show you all the best ones. These trattoria, as I mentioned, being a dining destination for all Romans means that the food you'll be having is going to be prepared traditionally.

Nesim

The wait staff, oh, this is another thing to look for. Older wait staff can be a good sign. I've sometimes been asked what the deal is with service in this country. Italian waiters are

salaried positions, and it's common for a waiter to work in the same restaurant their entire life. It's their career. And there are many places in this Testaccio where the wait staff still remember me sitting in a high chair. Italians are also not particularly good tippers, which is why maybe the service isn't as effusive and friendly as it may be in places where tips are more part of the service. Seeing older wait staff is actually a very good sign. In Testaccio, I'd say about half the restaurants have the same wait staff that they've had for 40 plus years.

Katy

Yeah. It's that something, that longevity and the continuity that I think is that's what makes it special. It's worthwhile venturing a little further around. It's a really nice walk, actually. We can go from just behind the Colosseum, and you can go and put your hand in the Mouth of Truth and see if it's going to get bitten off. And then you can wander up the Aventine Hill and go and look at the orange garden, and then go and look through the Aventine Keyhole, which is one of my favorite things to do. And then you've got the top of the hill, so you might as well just go down again. And then you're in Testaccio, and it's a really beautiful little neighborhood, and you can go in the main piazzas there, and there's kids kicking their football, and everyone's out for a passeggiata, before their dinner or after their dinner. It's a really nice vibe just to go down there. But you know what's even better? To go with someone like Nesim because he really does know everyone there. It's no jokes. It was like, "Hey" "Hey", everywhere we went. It's just a lovely way to experience a city like Rome because having lived in London myself and being in one of... I love these big cities and they're vibrant and they're fun. But it's just you really get a flavor of what it's like... Sorry, excuse the pun. But you really get a flavor when you're walking with someone. I learned so much from Nesim. It was so cool. Remember when you were telling us about the different sauces and how they build up?

Nesim

Oh, absolutely.

Katy

Maybe you want to tell people?

Nesim

Yeah. So the four pastas we're most famous for here in Rome are Cacio e pepe, Gricia, Carbonara, and Amatriciana. Carbonara is probably the most famous of them all. There's a fun relationship between these pastas, where if you start with the ingredients that go into Cacio e pepe, which, as I said before, are Pecorino Romano, which is the cheese, black pepper, cooking water, and the pasta itself. That's four ingredients, counting black pepper and cooking water as active ingredients. Now, we have this amazing cured pork product called guanciale, which is made from the cheek or jaw of the pig. In fact, in Italian, guancia means cheek. And it's basically our equivalent of pancetta, which is Italy's version of bacon. Pancia

means belly, so pancetta is the belly. Guancia means cheek, so guanciale comes from the cheek. It's fattier, so you need to render it out for a little longer to get it nice and crispy. But the fat that gives off is just as important to the final flavor of the sauce as the little crispy bits. And three of the four pastas I mentioned contain guanciale, and all four contain pecorino. So if you start with the ingredients that go in, cacio e pepe, and you add some guanciale, you get gricia, which is actually the least known of the four. Depending on what you add to gricia, you can get either carbonara or amatriciana. So if you take the ingredients of gricia, you mix the cheese and the black pepper with an egg before adding the pasta and the guanciale, you get carbonara, which, mind you, please NEVER contains cream. If you want to anger a Roman let them know that you put cream in your carbonara. You'll see the veins start to bulge, the nervous ticks will start to appear. Cream is actually a trick so that the eggs don't scramble. There's a way to avoid that we can cover. But then if you take the ingredients of the gricia, but you take the guanciale, you render it out, you cook it in tomato sauce for one to two hours, and then you add the pasta and the cheese, you get Amatriciana. So these four pastas are at most one, two ingredients away from each other, yet they taste so vastly different. And it's a perfect example of how in this country, one ingredient can completely change the look and flavor of a dish.

Nesim

And it's one of the beauties of Italian cuisine. It's based on simplicity and the quality of the ingredient, which is actually why it's so hard to replicate Italian food outside of this country. If you don't have the same quality ingredient, it just won't have the same intensity of flavor and it just won't taste the same. Now, Italians view Italian products... so anything that was raised or grown within this country as inherently better than anything that was grown or raised outside of Italy. This can sometimes have your average Italian be a little condescending when it comes to other cultures, cuisines and stuff, and they don't necessarily... I can't tell you the number of times I've been told that my friends or people I work with don't like marinades or sauces or stuff because it covers the true flavor of the food. When I first started cooking, I was explained the difference between French and Italian food as follows. The quality of French food is based on the quality of the chef. So if you have a sauce that contains 15 ingredients and half of those are not spectacular, a really good chef can still make that sauce taste incredible. Whereas with Italian food, if you don't have the same quality ingredients that you have here, there's nothing to hide behind. And so the dish will lack the depth of flavor, that intensity that you find here.

Katy

Well, the really good thing, what I love about Italians is they don't export their good stuff. They keep it for themselves.

Nesim

That is very true.

Katy

We export the good stuff here in Australia a lot of the times. And so what actually happened recently is China stopped import of our seafood products, which I found was excellent because we could finally get the best lobsters and stuff. So it's a really interesting cultural phenomenon, really. Now, Nesim, it's just like, I learned so much from you on our food tour. And what I would say is everyone who's been listening to this podcast for a while knows that I just, basically, I do a lot of food tours and I'd go test out things. And what Nesim is saying is absolutely right. You go to Bologna, you go to Venice, it's all different. You try different things. The thing I really appreciated about Nesim's tour and why I wanted to get him on the show is because he actually is taking it beyond the basic. You've just heard him explain the different pastas. I never heard anyone explain it from a cook's perspective, just the way that Nesim has explained it to us all just now.

Katy

So he did this and we actually tasted it as we went, which was really hard to do, as you can imagine. And for the record, my favorite is Gricia. That's my favorite pasta from Rome.

Nesim

Yeah, so good.

Katy

It's so good, yeah. And if anyone's going to Rome soon, they should put it on their bucket list that they have to try all four different pastas and choose their favorite and report back and let me know.

Katy

Absolutely.

Katy

But there's so many great things to try in Rome, and it's really good to have a guide to help you through all of that because you may not try things. Well, first of all, you don't know what to order, I think. Unless you're super well educated in food and you're a little bit adventurous, you might just go, I'm just going to go for the carbonara. Well, you're going to miss out on the Alla Gricia and you're going to miss out on the beautiful simplicity of cacio e pepe. I definitely think it's great to have someone that can help you out with those choices. Nesim, I'm so glad we reconnected and you're able to share these important tips with our listeners.

Katy

No one wants to eat bad food in Italy, but as we've heard, it's possible in Rome. So how can our listeners reach out and stay in touch with you if they want to join a tour or get some of your tips? Because I know you share quite a lot on social media as well.

Nesim

Yes. So I have an Instagram account. It's @fullbellytours. I also have a website, fullbellytours.com, where you can get a little more information about me, about the tours that I offer. I have a Facebook page and theoretically a TikTok account. Let's say that I'm not the most social media-minded person in the world, but I do my best. And I've actually started doing collaborations with local food businesses. So recently with one of the pizzeria that we visit at the market during the Testaccio day tour, we came up with a pizza based on a doner recipe for slow-roasted pears with young gorgonzola and aged balsamic. And Matteo, who's the owner of this pizzeria called Da Teo in Testaccio Market, he's like, Wow, this gives me an idea for pizza. And so actually, last Saturday, we ran a special where we did a pizza like that. We were talking about doing a monthly collaboration. And since my true passion lies in food and I do miss cooking because I... Well, I think I also romanticized what working in restaurants was. But I'm also branching out into collaborating with local businesses. So you can keep an eye out for that on my Instagram as well.

Katy

Amazing. Amazing. Well, if you're ever feeling like that, you just need to reread Bourdain. You know that, don't you? Yes. Kitchen Confidential is enough to put anyone off being a chef, really. Oh, I miss him.

Nesim

It's the only time that I've been genuinely upset when a famous person has passed. And yeah, reading Kitchen Confidential for me was a very pivotal moment in my career when I was like, Wow, someone's telling it as it is. But I knew that working in kitchens wasn't something that I wanted to do for the rest of my life because of how crazy and high-paced and physically taxing it can be, which is also why I can't believe my fortune to now be doing this. It is a very spectacular change of pace, and I get to talk about food instead of being stuck in the kitchen all day.

Katy

It's amazing. I'm so happy for you. Grazie, Nesim. Thank you so much. I'm looking forward to getting a full belly from you. Just doing the tour with you in Rome very soon. It's going to be very fun. Everyone can watch out. We'll definitely post some photos on Instagram and Facebook so you can see what's going on. But thanks again. Grazie. Thank you. Ciao.

Nesim

Ciao.

Katy

So many great tips there and I am happy to say that Nesim is fully in support of my favorite restaurant Roscioli and its associated outlets - the forno bakery and cafe. Phew! Honestly

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they do a great job especially with the traditional pastas. You must book well in advance though - it's popular for a reason!

I always spend time in Testaccio when I am in Rome. As Nesim mentioned, it is the ancient food hub of the city and so fascinating. There is a man made hill there made entirely of broken pieces of amphore - the vessels ancient romans used to transport olive oil and other foodstuffs. You'll learn about this and eat some of the best food in Rome if you join one of Nesim's tours.

We've put a link to his site and social media accounts in the shownotes on our website at untolditaly.com/169 for episode 169.

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 ust 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".