

# Untold Italy Episode 181 - A Tale of Roman Pastas - Part One

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 181.

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. Are you ready to head back to Rome today to learn all about its delicious pasta dishes. Direct from Rome my friend Nesim Bekalti from Full Belly Tours is back to give you the low down on the Eternal City's iconic pasta dishes - their history, real, somewhat embellished and untold stories of their origins and how they relate to one another.

As we say a lot on this podcast, to understand Italy and the Italians you need to understand their food as is, it is an indelible part of their culture and more importantly it's a critical part of their regional identity and the source of much rivalry and conjecture

So let's dive in and learn about mantecatura - one of my favorite Italian words and the many wonders of Roman pasta.

## **Katy**

Bentonarto Nesim. Hello and welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

## **Nesim**

Thank you, Katy. It's good to be back.

## **Katy**

I had so many wonderful messages about our last episode that we did together that I couldn't wait to have you back on the show. How are things going for you these days?

## **Nesim**

Things are going incredibly. Ever since the last episode came out, I have been happily very, very busy with work. Yeah, actually, I can't believe how well things are going.

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## Katy

Good for you. I'm so happy to hear it. Of course, we did catch up in Rome in April, wasn't it? It was super, super fun. Listen, for the people that missed that last episode that you were on, which is 169, in case anyone missed it, would you be able to just let them in on the secrets of Nesim and what you do?

## Nesim

Absolutely. My name is Nesim Bekalti. I am Roman but not Italian. My father's from Tunisia. My mom is French, raised in the US. I was born in Washington DC and raised here in Rome. I have always worked in hospitality. Cooking is my true passion and I spent most of my life bouncing around the world working in kitchens. Moved back to Rome, seven years ago and fell into food tours and loved it so much that I ended up starting my own food tour company called Full Belly Tours. That's what I do all day, every day now. I just get to talk incessantly about food and drink, which is what I do on my own time, so very happy.

## Katy

And you do it so well. You do it really well. Now, last time we were in Rome, I learned a lot. And there was one particular thing, I don't know if you remember, that you explained to me about a particular pasta dish. And just my mind was blown and I was like, 'Of course, of course - that's the magic trick.' And I like to think I'm a pretty good cook and know some tricks, especially when it comes to pastas, but listeners, let me tell you, Nesim has quite a few more. So what I've done is I've asked him back today to share some of these secrets with you so we can learn about pasta and specifically the pasta dishes of Rome. Do you want to take it off, Nesim? I think you had some insights into the origins of pasta.

## Nesim

Absolutely. So we will be focusing today on the four most famous Roman pastas, which are cacio e pepe, gricia, carbonara, and amatriciana. There is a fun link between these four pastas where if you start with the ingredients that go into the first one, cacio e pepe, which are Pecorino Romano cheese, pasta, the cooking water from the pasta, and black pepper, and you add one ingredient, you get gricia. Depending on what you add to gricia, you get either carbonara or amatriciana. And I will be elaborating on this shortly. But I figured to be able to talk about these dishes, we have to talk about the ingredients.

## Nesim

Pasta, first and foremost - there's a big misconception, or rather, a lot of people credit the invention of Italian pasta with Marco Polo, the famous explorer, coming back from China in the late 1200s. And he brought back the knowledge of how to make noodles, and that's how pasta became. But the first written record of pasta actually dates back to over 3,000 years ago when Greek and Etruscan cooks made a large flat sheets of unleavened dough called laganon that were then boiled, dressed, and stacked. About 1200 years later, in ancient Roman times, they referred to a similar dish called lagana, which reads as a very lavish

version of this layered pasta dish, containing stews made from both meat and fish. Lagana is one letter away from lasagna, so is thought to be the ancestor of the modern lasagna la bolognese, which was layered and then baked again in an oven.

## Nesim

The first actual record of noodle-like pasta dates back to 1154 or so, before Marco Polo came back, in the writings of the Arab geographer Idrisi, who mentions the tria, which was a thread shape dough that was prepared in Sicily. And in fact, nowadays, Palermo is famous for a type of pasta called Vermicelli di Tria. Pasta, as we know today, ie. prepared with semolina and water, is thought to have been invented by the Arabs, in particular by nomadic tribes of the desert who made the first bucatini by drying the dough around very thin strands of straw. And so it's thought that it was the Arabs who introduced pasta to the island of Sicily during their occupation of the island, and it then spread to the rest of the country. And I'm sure that when Marco Polo came back, he did introduce different versions of the long noodles that were popular in China.

## Nesim

It was actually in Naples in the 1600s that is credited with popularizing pasta on a massive scale. Following a famine that happened due to a boom in population and an increasing Spanish taxation, who controlled the area at the time. The consumption of meat and bread decreased dramatically, being replaced by pasta. The invention of the now-modern machinery that extrudes the pasta through bronze dyes made this product easier to mass produce and therefore even cheaper than it already was, making it exponentially more popular. And this is also why the best-dried pasta in this country now comes from the region around Naples, Gragnano, being the town that's most famous for it. And coincidentally, this is the same time period that tomato sauce was born because tomatoes were only brought into Italy in the mid 1500s because prior to the discovery of the Americas, potatoes, chillies, corn, and tomatoes were not found anywhere outside of the Americas. Which is funny because tomatoes are probably the ingredient that is most associated to our diet, to our Italian. That's a bit about the history of pastas as we know it.

## Nesim

The main four pastas that I said we're going to be talking about are Cacio e pepe, Gricia, Carbonara, and Amatriciana. But we can't talk about these without first talking about the two most important ingredients, which are Pecorino Romano and Guanciale.

## Nesim

So Pecorino Romano is a sheep's milk cheese. In fact, Pecorino tells you that it's a sheep's milk cheese because pecora in Italian means sheep. And so there are dozens, to not say hundreds of types of pecorino in this country, that range from young melting cheeses all the way to dry, crumbly aged cheeses like the Pecorino Romano. The Pecorino Romano has actually been made for over 2,000 years. And even in ancient Roman times, it was such an important source

of nutrition that Roman soldiers were given 27 grams a day, that's about an ounce, in their rations.

**Katy**

Oh, I don't know if that was enough.

**Nesim**

I agree. Sheep's milk is saltier and more acidic than cow's milk, so Pecorino Romano is considered salty. Italians talk about savory food in terms of sweet and savory. When they say sweet, it has nothing to do with the sugar content of the food. It just means it's the more delicate of the two options. So in this case, Pecorino Romano, which is made from sheep's milk, which is saltier and more acidic than cow's milk, is considered salty. Whereas Parmigiano Reggiano, parmesan cheese, is made from cows milk and is considered sweet. And so depending on what you are cooking, you would use one or the other to highlight either the sweet or savory notes in the dish. Pecorino is the one that we use for our local pastas, and so Roman pastas tend to be very punchy, very in your face. There's nothing subtle about our cuisine here.

**Nesim**

The other most important ingredient is called guanciale, and it's the cured pork jaw. The jaw is the cheek and part of the neck. This is a perfect example of a throwaway cut of the animal, the head, the people that could afford the more noble cuts of meat, didn't particularly care about.

**Nesim**

And then some genius realized that if you harvest the cheek and treat it with the same love and care that we do pancetta, which comes from the belly, which is our equivalent to bacon, or prosciutto, which is the ham, you get a product that nowadays, here in Rome, we value even more than these fancier cuts. Guanciale is a lot more intense in flavor than pancetta. It does contain a lot more fat. So one of the keys to making these dishes correctly is to render out guanciale on the lowest possible flame because you want the fat that it gives off to render very slowly and to not burn because you want it to retain its flavor and its delicious porkiness.

**Katy**

Yes, this is one of the key things. Nesim and I were having this discussion. I think people get really impatient, not looking at myself, but looking at myself, and they're like, Come on, what's going on with this rendering? They maybe turn the heat up to try and get it going, or they just don't bother to render it properly. It's like the no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, this is where things go wrong.

## Nesim

Absolutely. So if ever you eat one of these pastas that contain the guanciale, so Gricia, Carbonara or Amatriciana, and it tastes a little acrid or a little burnt, it's because they rendered out the guanciale very quickly. If you cook it off the way, say, you would bacon, the fat that burns and is smoking is actually breaking down and is becoming bitter. Now, if you're just cooking something like bacon that you're then going to take out and pat dry with a paper towel, you're not necessarily going to taste that. But since the fat that the guanciale gives off is just as important an ingredient as the little crispy bits themselves, if you cook the guanciale on too high a flame, the fat will start to break down and burn. Every fat has a smoke point, which is the temperature at which the fat starts to burn and break down. And it's very easy to see if you've reached that point or not. Just look at your pan. And if the guanciale or whatever you're cooking is frying very intensely and you see smoke coming off of the oil, then you've passed the smoke point and...

## Katy

Start again.

## Nesim

Yes. And it's actually why, for example, extra virgin olive oil and butter have fairly low smoke points. And it's why some people will add a little drop of vegetable oil or peanut oil to those kinds of dishes if you're trying to do it in very high heat cooking, because vegetable oil and peanut oil have very high smoke points, and so will help for these dishes not to burn. Now, that's definitely not something that you should do with these recipes, because the fat that the guanciale is off tastes spectacularly good. So the main thing is chop it up. It's down to personal preference whether you like it sliced thinner or whether you like it sliced chunkier, although in average, we tend to prefer the chunkier version here in Rome because we do like thick, chewy textural pastas around here. And the most important thing is to render it out on a very low flame.

## Nesim

So chop it up, toss it in the pan, start it on a medium flame. And then once it starts to become a little translucent and you see a little fat start to give off, lower it to the absolute minimum and be patient. This can take anywhere from 20 minutes to a half hour if you're not doing a lot of guanciale to - I've skirted a pot of guanciale that had three full ones in there for nearly 2 hours. But I promise your patience will be rewarded because the fat that it gives off will be just as flavorful and delicious as the little crispy bits of guanciale itself. So that is the first point.

## Nesim

It's also, I cannot stress enough that the quality of each ingredient that you buy to make these dishes has to be spectacular. If you make these dishes with some random non-Italian supermarket brand of pasta and some cheap, overly salty Pecorino Romano and pre-ground

pepper, and bacon, it's not going to taste particularly good. There are so few ingredients that go into these dishes that if you don't have the correct quality ingredient, this just won't taste right. And it's unfortunately why it's so hard to find proper Italian food outside of this country. If you don't have access to the same quality ingredient, each dish is so simple that it just won't taste the same. For this stuff, please go out and buy it like the fancy Italian pasta, try to find a place that has good Italian pork products.

### **Nesim**

Now, I will say this, if you can't find guanciale, use pancetta. If you can't find pancetta, it's okay to use bacon. But try to use the most natural version. So you don't want the like maple glazed, twice smoked stuff. Just go for a simple salt and pepper cure. It'll still taste good. The most important ingredient for all four of these pastas is the Pecorino Romano. Know that we're sneaky in this country. We keep the good stuff for ourselves and we export the inferior goods. So the Pecorino, which in the US is often simply called Romano cheese. The stuff that you find abroad will rarely be of the same quality as the stuff that you find here. Furthermore, a lot of Pecorino Romano, which is supposed to be made from the milk of sheep that are raised locally is actually made from sheep that are raised in Sardinia. The landscape in Sardinia being drier and more arid, the resulting milk is going to be saltier and more acidic. And so that will throw the balance of the dish off as well.

### **Nesim**

Here in Rome, we say that to judge pecorino romano, you judge it on how sweet it actually eats. So if you can cut a chunk off and eat it and it's not too salty, that's a really good thing. Whereas the cheaper stuff tends to be a little overly salty. And a trick that people use here that you can use at home is to mix a little bit of parmigiano or grana padano, which is a cheaper version of parmigiano, to add a little sweetness to balance out that overly strong pecorino.

### **Katy**

Yeah, that's actually really true. I think when we buy pecorino here in Australia, it's definitely super salty. And I think it's definitely worth keeping an eye out for. I mean, even I know here that we have producers that make their own pecorino here, and that's probably better. I mean, it's not going to be Pecorino Romano, but if you can find something that's been made closer to home, you'd probably be better off, I think, if it's a really good producer.

### **Nesim**

Yeah. And also try avoiding buying the pre-ground stuff because especially a cheese that's as strong as pecorino Romano can age very quickly and become too strong. And so it'll keep better in a chunk that you can then grind at home or have them grind for you in the store right as you're buying it. The stuff that's pre-ground gets funnier just as it sits in the container. And they also tend to add anti-caking agents to pre-ground cheeses, which will be

adding corn starch or these kinds of thickeners to the dish, which will also throw the balance of the dish completely off.

## **Katy**

But this is the grating of the cheese. This is the bit that blew my mind this year that I had no idea. I was literally sitting there going, What? Wait, what? Nesim, what is this? So tell everyone about the fineness of the grinding, because I did not know this.

## **Nesim**

So to achieve the correct texture of the sauce, the cheese has to be ground in a specific way. It's the same way that you get cheese ground in any store here in Italy. If you ask for grated Parmigiano or grated Pecorino, they have a machine that grinds it into this very fine powder, what we would say in Italian, as if it were snow. And it's the consistency that you get if you grate it on the rough part of the box grater. The old box grater is the ones that if you slip and you hit your knuckles - it will completely shred your knuckle. So you want to grate it on that side and you want it to be a very fine powder. You don't want the shavings and you don't want to use a micro plane. The micro plane being that more modern grater that's used a lot in professional kitchens that gives you these nice fluffy ribbons of grated cheese. Micro plane is fine if you're adding hard grated cheeses to cold things because you'll get these beautiful, nice, pillowy clouds on top. But if you use a micro plane to put it on top of something that's hot, the steam from the dish is going to actually have that nice fluffy mound collapse on itself, and it'll become this stringy mass of plastic cheese that won't incorporate into the sauce.

## **Nesim**

Now, if you can't get your hands on some pre-grated or there isn't a place that has a grater for you, you can just use your food processor or your blender. So you can use either your food processor or a blender and pulse the cheese until you get that desired consistency. But that's one of the most important things, because if you don't have the cheese in the right form, then the dish won't come out properly. So you want this very fine ground cheese, which will make it emulsify better in the sauce.

## **Nesim**

There is a step in proper pasta cookery called mantecatura, which is the step of dressing the pasta with the sauce. This is normally done by the cook in the kitchen. You take the pasta out of the cooking water a couple of minutes before it reaches al dente, because the pasta will keep cooking as you do the mantecatura. And you normally toss it directly into the pan with the sauce. You sauté it a couple of times so it starts to absorb the sauce, because the first thing that a starch wants to do when it comes out of a boiling cooking medium is to absorb the next liquid it comes into contact with, which is why you should go from the pot directly into the pan with the sauce and not rinse it with cold water and set it aside.

## Nesim

One of the cardinal rules of pasta is the sauce can wait for the pasta. The pasta cannot wait for the sauce specifically for that reason. By rinsing it and setting aside your waterlogging your pasta, so it won't absorb as much sauce, and you're also diluting the flavor of the pasta itself because you're rinsing it with bland water. And since it's the flavor of the pasta that you're trying to highlight with a little bit of condiment. By rinsing your pasta, you're killing its flavor, essentially.

## Katy

I've just got these visions of these pasta that's been doused in cold water with the soggy guanciale and the clumpy cheese, and it's.

## Nesim

Like, no. Yeah. This may very well happen the first times you guys try these dishes. Just try, try again. With the tips that I will tell you, you will achieve perfection. It may take a couple of tries, but it's actually easier than one would think if you use the following tricks.

## Nesim

For cacio e pepe, once you grind the cheese properly, you want to make a thick paste like a cheese paste. There's a couple of ways of achieving this. In the kitchen, what we would normally do, Italian kitchens have big double boilers where we cook the pasta that has starchy pasta water continuously in it. So you would get some of that starchy pasta water, you would put it into a large bowl, and you would add a lot of cracked black pepper, like freshly cracked black pepper. If you want to go above and beyond, you can even toast that pepper before grinding it. You'll get even more flavor from the pepper. And you crack it into the hot starchy pasta water and you'll get extraction of flavor from that hot water from the pepper itself. Then when it's cooled to room temperature, you start adding handfuls of this grated Pecorino Romano.

## Nesim

Remember, ground like snow, stirring until it forms a thick paste. Then when the pasta is about two-thirds of the way through the cooking process, what you would traditionally do is you would take some of the cooking water, you would put it in a pan, you would take the pasta out, put it into the pan with the cooking water, and you'll finish the cooking in that pan. So you'll cook it for a couple more minutes. Say you're doing spaghetti, which takes between 9 and 11 minutes, depending on the thickness. About six minutes in, you would put some cooking water into the pan. This is separate from the cooking water that you made the cheese paste out of. You take the pasta out of the cooking water, you put it into the pan, and you start cooking it down in the pasta water. As the pasta water reduces, the starches that the pasta has given off are going to thicken it. And so when you get this creamy, thicker consistency, you then add the cheese paste, you stir, and it'll turn into this lovely sauce. Traditionally, you wouldn't even have to use the cheese paste. You could just put the grated



cheese directly into the pasta and the thicker sauce at that point. But doing the cheese sauce first is a trick that should help things go easily. Because if you just add the cheese directly to the pan, you risk having the cheese congeal like I was talking before with the micro plane stuff.

**Katy**

Yeah, well, I think that's happened to me.

**Nesim**

Yeah. Unfortunately, especially - the first time I tried to make cacio e pepe, it happened. So if it happens to you, don't worry, it's perfectly normal. The easiest way to do it is you make that cheese paste in a bowl that's larger than the amount of pasta you're going to cook. When the pasta is maybe one minute away from being cooked, you take it out of the cooking water from the pasta and you put it into that cheese paste. And you want to stir like a lunatic for 20, 30 seconds, which is why you want a really big bowl so the pasta doesn't fly everywhere. And the heat from the pasta will melt the cheese and it will keep giving off a little more starch as you stir. And it'll turn into lovely, creamy, luscious sauce without the addition of any other ingredients.

**Nesim**

Get into the habit whenever you drain your pasta. Before doing so, get a coffee cup and fill it with that pasta water. That starchy pasta water can help you in a number of situations. For example, if you do get the clumpy cheese mixture, add a little bit of another couple of handfuls of cheese, a little more pasta water, and stir, and it should turn back into a sauce. It won't be quite as successful as if the cheese had not congealed, but it'll be easier than starting over.

**Katy**

Because I can just see myself just doing the congealed cheese and just going, Oh, no. Cutting off a chunk of Roman soldiers-sized cheese and just sitting there munching on that, wondering what to do. So these tips are very welcome.

**Nesim**

Yeah, I have done that as well, I must admit, in frustration. For this pasta, I find that long noodles tend to work very well because the slipperiness that they have and the fact that they're constantly twirling in and out of each other will make the mantecatura, the dressing, more easy. And so it's easier to get this creamy sauce.

**Nesim**

For the gricia, which is cacio e pepe, those four ingredients, plus guanciale that has previously been rendered out. It's the exact same process. Only when you add the pasta to the black pepper cheese paste, you also add the guanciale, and I like to add all of the fat that

it gives off. Some people will use it a little more sparingly. That is completely down to personal preference. And then same thing, start stirring. Like a lunatic, the extra fat from the guanciale will actually make the sauce emulsify more easily. So it should actually be easier to achieve a gricia than it is to achieve a cacio e pepe. And in fact, the simpler the dish, often the harder it is to achieve correctly because there's nowhere to hide. In this case, there's delicious pork fat to make everything okay, even if you do get the clunky strings of cheese.

## Nesim

The gricia is actually the jump-off point for the next two recipes. Gricia is often referred to as a tomatoless amatriciana or an eggless carbonara. And it actually predates both of those recipes. So cacio e pepe was one of the first to have been invented. Most locals will tell you that the origin of this dish is normally tied to the transumanza, which is the traditional twice-yearly migration of sheep and cows from the mountains in the Plains. This happens in the winter and from the Plains back to the mountains in the summer. During this journey, the shepherds needed preserved foods that were easily transportable. So dried spaghetti, aged pecorino, and black pepper were all perfect candidates. Guanciale, the cured pork jail, is also a perfect ingredient for this. There are actually suggestions that the copious amounts of black pepper the recipe calls for (because here in Rome, we don't often use black pepper. We normally do salt and a pinch of chili flake for seasoning when we cook) but when we use black pepper, we use a ton of it as an active ingredient. And so there are suggestions that the large amounts of black pepper the recipe calls for was actually to keep the shepherds warm. As pepperine, which is the active ingredient in black pepper, is similar to capsaicin, which is the active ingredient in chillies, in that it's an irritant to human beings, and it's why it triggers mild heat experience when consuming it, but obviously less than the chili pepper.

## Nesim

However, some say that the first to create this dish were noblemen who'd differentiate the dish from the common peasant fare of boiled pasta with grated cheese, added foreign spices, which until the 1700s were harder to come by, more expensive, and implied wealth and status. In fact, in the north, there are many pasta dishes, savory pasta dishes that are finished with cinnamon and sugar, which were the equivalent fancy ingredients that they would add to show that there was some status, and they had money to throw around, basically.

## Nesim

The Gricia is thought to have been born in a town called Grisciano, which is very close to Amatrice, which is the town that gave birth to the Amatriciana, and that's the most probable origin of that dish. They also hypothesized that it could refer to the bread and food retailers in Rome that were called il Grigio. However, since in the town of Grisciano, every 18th of August, they actually do the Sagra de la Gricia, which is like the local celebration for that pasta dish - it seems that that's the town that actually gave birth to the dish.

**Katy**

Have you been to that Sagra?

**Nesim**

Unfortunately not. I actually only found out about it when I was doing research for the podcast, but I really want to go. Unfortunately, this year I'm going to be in Sardinia.

**Katy**

Where you can be sussing out the Pecorino.

**Nesim**

Yes, I will bring back other types of pecorino to compare. But yeah, it's definitely on my calendar of things to do for next year.

**Katy**

Yeah, for sure.

**Nesim**

Kind of kicking myself for not leaving two days later, but I can't complain. So the Gricia is the jump off point for the last two dishes that I was talking about, the carbonara and the amatriciana. The carbonara, which is probably the most famous Roman dish, especially internationally, also happens to be the most butchered Roman dish internationally. Many places consider it to be a cream sauce with bacon. If you want to anger a Roman, tell them that you put cream in your carbonara. You'll see the nervous ticks start to appear. The veins will start to bulge in their forehead. The addition of cream is actually a trick so that the eggs don't scramble. But researching the origins of the carbonara, which is actually the most disputed out of all of these, up until the '90s, even many famous established Italian chefs, some of which are considered to be like the forefathers of Italian cuisine as we know it nowadays, would add cream to La Carbonara. Yes, I was very surprised reading this. And the first written recipes for the carbonara. The first one was actually in an American cookbook where they were talking about an Italian trattoria, I think it was in Chicago or Boston, don't quote me on it, but it's somewhere in the US, where there was an Italian restaurant that was making the dish kind of as we know it now, with pancetta, eggs, black pepper, and pecorino cheese.

**Nesim**

The first Italian-written recipe that's found was found in 54, I think and called for pancetta, gruyere cheese, and garlic. So carbonara, as we know it, has a very disputed origin. The most credited story nowadays has to do with the American Army and the rations of bacon and powdered egg yolks that American soldiers were given. Apparently, once they took over the town of Rimini, which is further north than Rome, where the meeting of the British and the

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American armies, they hired a cook from Bologna to make a meal for them, a celebratory meal. And so he got the very good quality bacon from the Americans and this powdered egg yolk. They had really good quality heavy cream. And so he mixed these dishes, adding some local cheese and then finished it with black pepper because he said it added a nice depth of flavor to it. He was then hired to become the official cook for the joint Allied forces. They then went to Rome. He was in Rome for a couple of years, and that's when the dish was popularized in Rome. That's why it's thought that it's a Roman dish. A lot of locals aren't very happy with this explanation because it means that Rome's most famous pasta dish was made by a Bolognese cook with ingredients from the American Army, which you can imagine most Italians are not particularly happy about.

### **Nesim**

I was recently told by a very good friend of mine whose family has owned dozens of restaurants. He grew up in restaurants. He told me that the Carbonara actually originates as a work contract between the farmer that needed his wood to be turned into coal and the carbonaro, which was the person that would turn it into coal. Carbone in Italian means coal. And so this is a very lengthy process. You have to make a big pile of wood, you have to start the fire, then you have to cover it with a tarp normally and then cover it in dirt, and it has to sit for up to a week, and the slow smoldering turns the wood into coal. The Carbonaro had to be on premises at all times to not start wildfires and to make sure that the wood didn't actually burn. And so the farmer would give them at the beginning of this process, a dozen eggs, a guanciale, a big piece of Pecorino Romano, some black pepper, and a big bowl to mix it in, as well as a pot to cook it. So the carbonara was like the unofficial work contract where you were providing the person with the food necessary to last the week in the forest while he made the coal. And he assured me that his grandmother was doing this way before World War II. This is one of the fun things about this country where it's often hard to pin down an actual explanation for where a lot of food comes from. Often there being a more picturesque explanation, and then sometimes a possibly more factual one.

### **Katy**

Yes. Well, I would like to hear the Bolognese react to a Roman version of a Bolognese sauce.

### **Nesim**

Well, it's funny. We do, in their eyes, butcher lasagna because the traditional lasagna is made with layers of ragu, which is the meat sauce, and bechamel. And then they add grated in parmesan cheese. That's how they make it in Bologna. Here in Rome, we omit the bechamel and we just put a ton of Mozzarella. Now, since I grew up here, I admit that I am more biased towards the Roman kind. I'm sorry, Bologna. But yeah, we have already destroyed all sorts of stuff in their eyes.

## Katy

Well, even I know where my mother-in-law is from. They put eggs, like cut-up, sliced, hard-boiled eggs in their lasagna and peas.

## Nesim

Oh, wow. I've had peas and mushrooms in lasagna here in Rome. One of the most delicious lasagna that I've ever had was actually in Naples. There they make lasagna with dried sheets of pasta, which are just made with flour and water. It's like the curdy ones that you find in the US, which I thought was an American invention, but it's not. And they actually make it with their version of ragu, which is, I think, what gave birth to the American Sunday gravy, where you take ribs, sausages, chunks of beef, pork, pork skin, and tiny meatballs, and you braise them for 10 hours in tomato sauce. And then they take all of that meat and they turn that into a lasagne with little bits of hard-boiled eggs and cheese and stuff.

## Katy

Yes. I forgot the little meatballs from my mother-in-law because she is actually from that area. But then I've got to tell you about my favorite lasagna, and then we'll go back to the Roman pasta. But I had it last year on the Sorrento Peninsula, and it was made with a tiny bit of meat. I think it was pork. Then it was made with smoked buffalo Mozzarella cheese. It was incredibly good. Then very finely graded lemon on top. Honestly, it blew my mind. I wasn't even hungry. I just kept eating it. It was so good. I was like, What is this magic. I will be going back there. And Giovanni from Joe Banana, who's one of our sponsors on occasion, he was the one that took me there and I just was delicious.

## Katy

Ooh yes, Talking about food is extensive work, especially with Nesim who knows a LOT about Roman dishes and of course food in general.

This ended up being a very long recording so we've made it into 2 episodes. Part 2 is focused on how to make these exciting dishes and where to try them in Rome. You'll have to tune in next week to hear all about that.

In the meantime don't forget to check out Nesim's tours at [FullyBellyTours.com](https://FullyBellyTours.com). They are so fun and you really get to feel part of the local neighborhood when you're out and about with Nesim.

We've put a link to his site and social media accounts in the show notes on our website at [untolditaly.com/181](https://untolditaly.com/181) for episode 181.

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

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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, I'm looking forward to next week's deep dive into where to find the best carbonara in Rome and also Nesim's exceptional tips on how to make it... "ciao for now".

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