# Untold Italy Episode 18 - A Tale of Roman Pastas - Part Two

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 182.

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**
Buongiorno everyone. Still dreaming of Roman pasta? I hope so! Today we're going to continue our discussion about carbonara, gricia and cacio e pepe from last week's episode featuring Nesim Bekalti from Full Belly Tours. So if you haven't listened to that one yet, go ahead and catch up with episode 181. On it, Nesim insisted that we talked about the ingredients of Roman pasta and I'm so glad we did. After all, they are the foundations of these simple but oh-so-delicious recipes. Today we're learning about how to make these dishes the Roman way and where you can go to try the very best in Rome.

So let's jump back in!

**Katy**

All right, let's go back to Rome. We've done the carbonara. I don't care the story - the stories are good. We can choose the one we like, right?

**Nesim**

Yes, absolutely. But the most important thing is how to make it properly. The carbonara is possibly the trickiest one to achieve because eggs cook at a very low temperature. Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius, which is about 212 Fahrenheit if I remember correctly. Eggs start cooking at about 60 degrees Celsius, which is about 150 Fahrenheit. So the heat from the pasta is enough to scramble your eggs. And it's why so many people get scrambled eggs when trying to make carbonara. So there's a couple of tricks that will help you avoid getting scrambled eggs without the use of cream.

**Nesim**

The first is you want to use a short pasta that has a hole through it, like rigatoni, mezze maniche, penne, although that's not that traditional. You can use any short pasta that will allow for air to go through as you're doing the mantecatura, as you're stirring the pasta with

the sauce. The extra air going through will drop the temperature and will lower your chances of getting scrambled eggs.

**Nesim**

The other mistake people tend to make is that they put everything back into the pot where they boil the pasta. That pot is now hot, increasing your chances of getting scrambled eggs, and it has high walls which trap steam, which is why I suggest to mix the cheese, egg, black pepper mixture like you would for the cacio e pepe or gricia in a very large bowl. That will allow for steam to escape and the bowl is cold, so it decreases your chances of getting scrambled eggs.

**Nesim**

The last problem is people just don't move fast enough. Depending on how much pasta you're cooking, if you're cooking for lots of people, the larger the amount of pasta, the larger the nuclear core of cooked pasta that's going to be at the very middle, the higher the chances of you getting scrambled eggs. So I would start making maybe two people at a time, maybe then upgrading to four, maybe then upgrading to a little more. Just know that even I, who have cooked professionally for most of my life, do not make carbonara if I'm cooking for more than six or eight people. It's just you're risking too much. The pasta will sit for too long. It may very well turn into scrambled eggs, even if you do all the steps properly. But the steps are as follows.

**Nesim**

So when talking about carbonara, you normally talk about the ingredients per person. So it's a handful of pecorino cheese that's been graded to snow, one egg per person, and then it's one of each for the pot. So if I was cooking for 10 people, I would do 11 eggs and 11 handfuls of cheese. Since we have very differently shaped and sized hands, I now use four heaped soup spoons of Pecorino Romano, and I like to use one egg plus one egg yolk because restaurants, to make this dish richer and more satisfying, will either use one egg plus one egg yolk or one to three egg yolks, depending on how rich you want to make it. I like the whole egg in it, so I do one egg plus one egg yolk per person and four heaped soup spoons of Pecorino Romano. If you notice that your Pecorino Romano is the very salty, funky stuff, do three heaped soup spoons of Pecorino Romano and one heaped soup spoon of Parmigiano Reggiano or Grana Padano, which is the cheaper version of Parmigiano. And like that, you'll add a little sweetness that will balance out the overt funkiness that Pecorino can sometimes have.

**Katy**

Right. Well, you don't want to say... I like how you keep saying Grana Padano is the cheaper version. It's so funny because I was in Lombardy once, and they don't like hearing that at all. They're like, This is the king of cheeses. We're like, Oh. They're very passionate about their Grana Padano.

**Nesim**

It's true. Let me re qualify that statement. So Parmigiano Reggiano can only be made from the milk of three specific breeds of cattle in a very specific area around the city of Parma. The exact same cheese made from the milk of any other local cattle in a much larger area up in the north, which is called Padania, hence Grana Padano, you get this Grano Padano. So it's not an inferior version per se, but it's like the difference between brandy and cognac. Cognac is brandy from the region of cognac. Maybe I'm just digging a deeper hole right now.

**Katy**

I think you might be.

**Nesim**

I will just say this. I use Grana Padano all the time, especially when I was living abroad, because Parmigiano Reggiano is already very expensive in this country, much less when you live outside of Italy. So I think Grana Padano is a wonderful... I don't want to say alternative, but it gives you much the same results as Parmigiano Reggiano when you're using it to cook.

**Katy**

Perfettto.

**Nesim**

Back to the Roman pastas. So I was saying that if your Pecorino is too strong, you can sweeten, and I'm using our quotes as I say sweeten, by adding a little bit of Parmigiano or Grana Padano, which is actually what a lot of the sneakier restaurants here in Rome do. They buy the inferior quality Pecorino and they add a little bit of Grana Padano to sweeten the mix. And so you think they're using the good quality stuff.

**Nesim**

So you want to make sure that like with the Cacio e pepe, when you mix the cheese and the eggs, that it forms a thick paste. This will largely depend on how fresh your eggs are, because the fresher the egg, the more solid the white. So if you don't have the freshest eggs, maybe just add more cheese until it tightens up into this thick paste. And then the amount of black pepper is to taste. But as I mentioned before, here in Rome, we rarely use black pepper. So when we do, it becomes an active ingredient and we use a ton of it. And in my opinion, if you don't use a ton of black pepper, the balance of the dish is off because you need the spicyness and the slight heat from the intense amount of black pepper that goes into the dish.

**Nesim**

Actually, one of the most romantic stories about the origin of the carbonara is that it was the carbonaro's wife, La Carbonara, who was always covered in soot because her husband was always covered in soot. And so when she would cook this dish, the black pepper represented

the soot that would come off as she was cooking. But that is the least probable of the origin stories.

**Nesim**

Now, if you do get scrambled eggs, which may very well happen the first times you're doing this, do not panic. Remember to fill your coffee cup with pasta water before you drain the pasta. If you do get scrambled eggs, add a little bit of - little bit of that cooking water, maybe a couple of tablespoons at a time, depending on how much pasta you've made. Add another handful of cheese, stir, and it'll turn back into a sauce. It won't be as good as if the eggs hadn't scrambled, but it'll be better than having scrambled egg pasta.

**Nesim**

The way to tell if this has happened, because sometimes cooks get sneaky and if it scrambles, they try to send it out anyway, is to see if the pasta sauce is grainy in any way. Carbonara should normally have a very smooth, very yellow texture. And it's actually technically a savory custard because the heat of the pasta actually sets the eggs. So you want it to be this very smooth, creamy, normally very deep yellow sauce. If the eggs scramble and they let them back down, the way I told you with some cooking water and extra cheese, the pasta sauce is going to seem very grainy and will tend to be a little lighter in color because when eggs cook, they go a little lighter. So if ever you're served the carbonara and you see that it's not a smooth, creamy sauce, but it's actually got some graininess in it, the cook is trying to pull one over on you and feel free to send it back.

**Katy**

You don't want that. No.

**Nesim**

Yeah, absolutely not. And if a visitor calls out an Italian on having cooked the pasta incorrectly, you're probably going to get much better service after that because they will be mortified that they were called out by a non local. Because messing with pasta is a cardinal sin in this country. And unfortunately, many locals think that visitors can't tell the difference. So if you can put your foot down, be nice about it. A lot of people worry about sending food back, thinking that the restaurant is then going to spit it in your food. I've worked in restaurants my whole life. I've never seen that happen. And as long as you're nice about sending it back, you're giving the restaurant a chance to make it up to you. Whereas if you don't send it back, you'll never go back. You'll never have something good to say about the place. So think of it as a way to let the restaurant... You're giving the restaurant a second chance, basically.

**Nesim**

If you forget to set aside the cooking water from the pasta, which I admit I do so fairly regularly, just run some warm tap water. It'll serve much the same purpose because as you stir

the pasta, the pasta will continue to leach a little bit of starch out. So if you forgot to set your pasta water aside, don't worry, worse things have happened.

**Nesim**

Now, the final one, Amatriciana, is credited with coming from the town of Amatrice, which is very famous for producing guanciale, the cured pork cheek that we're talking about. The first recipe actually dated back to 1927 to a local cookbook called the Il Talismano della Felicita', the Talisman of Happiness, which I think is a wonderful name for a cookbook. And it actually called for ground guanciale cooked in extra virgin olive oil, lard, and onions and you would then add fresh peeled tomatoes too. Once you cook that sauce down, you would finish it with a grated pecorino. They do say you can use Parmigiano instead and lots of black pepper. The use of onions is now really frowned upon by traditionalists. I must admit, I also do not appreciate onions in my Amatriciana. But onion was actually present in most recipes for Amatriciana well into the 90s. But the purists, that I will include myself into this category for once, think that you do not need onion if you have good quality tomatoes and good quality guanciale. The onion would add some sweetness to the dish because of the natural sugars that are present in onions, especially when you caramelize them.

**Nesim**

So there's two schools of thought on how to make Amatriciana. The old school is you render out the guanciale. You then add the canned tomatoes. You can use fresh, but it's more common nowadays when we make pasta sauces in general use canned tomatoes. You let it cook for one to three hours, depending on how big a batch you're making. And when it's finished, the fat will separate to the top of the sauce. You dust a generous layer of graded Pecorino on top. It'll absorb into that fatty layer, turning this beautiful bright orange color. And you let it sit for about a half hour. Then when you're ready to eat, you just cook your pasta and you do the mantecatura with that sauce. This, you get the most flavorful sauce, but the bits of guanciale become soft and braised and have lost most of their flavor to the sauce.

**Nesim**

So what most restaurants do nowadays is they render out the guanciale, they remove the little crispy bits, they use the rendered fat to cook the tomato sauce, which will impart a good amount of flavor, and then they add the little crunchy bits at the end.

**Nesim**

I say, why choose? Start with one and a half times the amount of guanciale the recipe calls for, render it out, remove half that you're going to add back in at the end as the little crispy bits, and then leave the other half in with the tomatoes. Like that, you'll get both the most flavorful sauce and the little crispy, punchy bits at the end. And one of the things that I like to add, which is acceptable, yet optional, is to add either chili flake or whole dried chillies. I find that that flavor marries perfectly with the tomato and the guanciale. Whereas I'm not a big fan of adding black pepper to my amatriciana, but that is also an acceptable option.

**Katy**

We always have to do what's acceptable, I think. Why be stingy with guanciala? I don't know why anyone would be stingy with it. Let me tell you, I have been on a tasting test of all these pastas with Nesim, and it's quite the experience. What's really great is every time he explains it, I learn something completely new. There's some little nugget of gold that comes out every time I hear him talk about it. It's amazing. Now, Nesim, we know how to make it, but when we're in Rome, we really want to taste it. So where can we go where is Nesim approved - in Rome. We know we're getting the good stuff.

**Nesim**

I'll tell you the more famous ones that are really good for each specific dish. So for me, the best Cacio e pepe that you can get, also because there's some theatrics behind it, is at this place called Felice a Testaccio. Felice is probably the most famous trattoria here in Testaccio. And ordering the cacio e pepe is really cool because they finish it table side for you. So the mantecatura, the step of dressing the pasta with the sauce, which is normally done in the kitchen, the waiter will do it for you. The waiter comes out with a big bowl of Tonnarelli, which is a fresh egg pasta. It's like a squared thick spaghetti with lots of graded Pecorino on top, some cracked black pepper, and a little bit of cooking water under that you don't see. The waiter sets this bowl down in front of you, grabs your fork and your spoon, and they start mixing it really quickly. And it comes together from these four disjointed ingredients into this lovely, luscious, creamy sauce right before your eyes.

**Nesim**

For the Gricia, the best one I've had, I admit the Gricia is the one that I order less and you tend to find least often. But the best one I've had recently was at a very famous place in Trastevere called Da Enzo al 29. Enzo at 29. And it's a little traditional trattoria that's tucked away in a little alley in Trastevere, a neighborhood that's harder and harder to come by, good traditional places to eat nowadays. And in fact, that place is super busy getting really long lines to eat there.

**Nesim**

For Carbonara, I've had a spectacular version at Roscioli. Roscioli is that little family that has a little food empire in the center of town near Campo de Fiori. And they have excellent versions of all of the Roman pastas. But I remember the carbonara there very fondly.

**Nesim**

And Amatriciana, the place that I have gone ever since I was little is this trattoria in Trastevere called Checco er Carettiere, where they do the more old school version of the amatriciana, where they braise the guanciale in with the sauce. They get this super, super flavorful sauce that they serve with Paccheri, which are these very big, smooth rigatoni. And

they're perfect for catching all the nice little bits of guanciale inside. Those would be my recommendations for where to find these dishes.

**Katy**

I've been to most of those places and I have to agree, Felice is very special and it's good to go there maybe on a weekend, maybe on a Sunday afternoon - you'll have to make a reservation.

**Nesim**

Absolutely.

**Katy**

It's one of those places where the Romans will go and we have a special occasion. Do you know what you say?

**Nesim**

Yeah, it's definitely a more celebratory place. It gets super busy. So you definitely do need to make a reservation. And often you need to call a couple of weeks ahead, so word to the wise. It is also the only place I know of in the neighborhood that has multiple sittings. So they do turn tables and so they'll seat you, if I remember correctly, they're at 1230 or at two, something along those lines.

**Nesim**

And actually at Felice there's also another dish that I feel like I have to mention, which is a variation or like an offshoot of a main called Involtini alla Romana. You take a thin slice of a tough cut of beef, you put a slice of prosciuto down, a stock of celery and carrot, you roll it up and you braise it in tomato sauce for 2-3 hours until tender. They take that tomato sauce, a pad of butter and some parmigiano, and they do the same table side mantecatura. This dish is called Burro e Sugo, butter and sauce. And it's one of the ways that we like to finish tomato sauce is to add a little sweetness, as I mentioned before. So that's something to seriously consider.

**Nesim**

While we're on the topic of other offshoots of dishes that you may find here, the other Roman pasta dishes I would recommend looking for are Paglata, which is a dish made by braising. Now, this is not going to sound particularly sexy to most of you, but it's the intestine of the milk fed veal or lamb that contains rennet. Rennet is the enzyme that coagulates milk proteins into cheese. So there's some naturally occurring ricotta in there, and it's simply braised in tomato sauce. And when made properly, it's not funky, it's not gamy in any way. So Pagliata is a super traditional dish, often served as a main, and they'll also use it as a pasta sauce.

**Nesim**

You also have La coda alla Vaccinara, which is the most famous Roman oxtail preparation, which is braised in tomato sauce with lots of celery. And they'll sometimes add cocoa, sometimes also adding pine nuts and or raisins. And we'll often use that tomato sauce to dress pasta with. So it would be normally rigatoni con sugo di coda. Sugo being the Roman term for the tomato braising liquid that a meat was cooked in.

**Nesim**

You also have the famous Arrabbiata, which means angry, and that's that spicy tomato sauce. It's a garlic tomato sauce spiced with lots of chillies and lots of fresh partially.

**Nesim**

And the last one, which is a more recent invention, is called La pasta alla Zozzona. Zazzona or Zotzo in Roman dialect means dirty. It's basically a combination of the four traditional pastas we were talking about before, so a Cacio e pepe, Gricia, Carbonara, and Amatriciana, with the addition of sausage. You basically render out guanciale and sausage together, and then in a bowl you mix the egg, pecorino, and black pepper. You cook the guanciale and the sausage and tomato sauce, and then you combine everything together. Yeah, you'll probably need to take a nap after it, but it is quite spectacular.

**Katy**

Wow. When I listen to these pasta dishes, it does seem to me that they're best eaten in a, I don't know, winter maybe. I know it's very hot in Rome at the moment. Is it the right time of year to be eating like the Zotzo?

**Nesim**

That is a very good question. Incredibly, our diet does not vary that much between winter and summer, so we're still eating these dishes throughout the summer months. Maybe we'll have them more for dinner than for lunch. It is true that seafood tends to come in more prevalent in the summer months because seafood pasta dishes tend to be lighter, especially when you're comparing them to the ones we just spoke about that are laden with cheese and pork fat, sometimes eggs. But we do eat these dishes year-round. It isn't a seasonal dish. Many other areas in the country will have dishes that are seasonal. The Roman diet tends to stay pretty heavy year-round. Maybe we'll have white wine with it instead of red in the winter months to keep things lighter. But we do tend to eat this stuff year-round, even though it doesn't make much sense weather-wise.

**Katy**

Well, it's good to know if everyone's in Rome, then they're going to be able to get those dishes. Because I think sometimes it's a bit disappointing when you miss out on something because you've come at the wrong time of year. Maybe the artichoke in the springtime.

**Nesim**

Definitely.

**Katy**

But you can still get the pasta, so that's the main thing.

**Nesim**

Yes, those you will find all the time. There are little tweaks that you can use. The things that you would make them different or special would be the type of pepper you use. So you can use traditional black pepper corns, but there's dozens of varieties of types of pepper, wild ones, green peppercorns, picked peppercorn, so you could play with that.

**Nesim**

The type of Pecorino will also play into it. Some people prefer using other types of Pecorino, although it wouldn't be super traditional. But this especially goes back to what I was talking about, about the better quality Pecorino being the sweeter kind.

**Nesim**

And the last thing that you could play around with is where the guanciale is from and what it's cured with. Guanciale will always have one side that's covered by the skin, which protects it. The other side that was the exposed flesh, they will dust in spices after having salt in them. That spice layer being an extra layer of protection against spoilage, bugs, etc. So most traditionally, they just dust it in black pepper. Many places will do black pepper and chili flake. Some places do just chili flake. One of the ones that I've found most pleasant actually has cinnamon in the curing mix, and it adds this wonderful complexity of flavor. So another thing to consider.

**Katy**

Oh, my goodness. Literally, it's a lifetime of work, isn't it? To really get to know these pastas. And it's a…

**Nesim**

Absolutely.

**Katy**

If you're going to choose something to make your life's work, why not make it pasta, I say. Now, I did have one question. What's about this Alfredo? It's a bit cheeky.

**Nesim**

Okay. So Alfredo. I actually thought that Alfredo's sauce was an American invention because I'd only ever heard of it when I moved to the US. And I grew up here in Rome where

theoretically Alfredo was invented. And when I was in the US, I would explain that it's as if an American came to Rome and found the Thomas Burger. It's just a name and a food. Whereas supposedly there are two restaurants that have claimed to have invented the Fettucine alla Alfredo. Both restaurants are called Alfredo. One is called Alfredo alla  Scrofa, which is on a street called Via dela Scrofa. The other one is, I think, just called Alfredo, and it's right off of Villa del Corso. These are both in the dead center of town, which already in and of itself isn't the best sign for a dining establishment in this city. But I've actually been to one of these because people kept asking me on tour about the Alfredo dish and having never tried it - one day, my wife and I said, All right, let's go to the more famous one of the two and see what this dish is all about. I have rarely been more disappointed when being served pasta.

**Nesim**

It was a bowl of really, really thin fettucine that were cooked to the point where you could break them apart with your tongue and your mouth, dressed with a ton of butter and parmigiano, which is fine. I mean, adding butter and parmigiano to stuff will always make something taste good. But it costs something like €20 and has nothing to do with what Alfredo is in the rest of the world. In the rest of the world, Alfredo is a cream sauce. And in both cases here in Rome, it's just going to be butter and cheese. So feel free to check it out. But let's just say I'm not going to be heading back there anytime soon.

**Katy**

Isn't that what they serve kids?

**Nesim**

Well, actually, that's a good point. When the first sauces that you serve kids, absolutely, is just pasta with butter and cheese. And especially if you're not feeling well, I tend to associate butter and cheese to when I was little and I had a tummy ache. And so my mom would make me white rice and put just a little bit of butter and a little bit of Parmigiano. So yeah, it is more of a kid's type dish and is not something that Romans eat or necessarily know is a Roman thing. I repeat, I thought it was just an American invention.

**Katy**

Yeah. I don't know about the rest of our listeners, but when I was sick, I think we just had crackers. We didn't have the Parmigiano Reggiano cheese.

**Nesim**

Yeah, we're a little spoiled in this part of the world.

**Katy**

Yeah. I think I would like to say that our listeners are very sophisticated and very interested in learning about all the different types of pasta. It's just been an absolute pleasure, as always, today to hear you talking about this with so much passion. Everyone, if you're going to

Rome, definitely meet up with Nesim if you can, because he has got just a really great way of sharing the culture of the food of his city and his neighborhood. Now, Nesim, how can people reach out to you if they want to join a food tour, if they want to follow you on social media, which is also a good idea.

**Nesim**

You can reach me on Instagram @fullbellytours. You can also visit my website. It's fullbellytours.com, where you can actually book through the website now. And you can always reach me by email at info@fullbellytours.com

**Katy**

Fantastic. It's just so great to see you doing what you do best, talking about food and showing people around. And if you are in the Testaccio neighborhood, you are definitely going to bump into Nesim at some stage, whether it's at the market or at the gelato shop or the pizza shop. It's quite a fun thing to do. You'll spot Nesim everywhere. So nice to see you, Nesim. Thank you so much for joining us on Untold Italy today and I'm so much looking forward to getting back to Rome and continuing my food adventures with you.

**Nesim**

I cannot wait. Thanks again for having me. It's always so much fun.

**Katy**

Yeah, anytime, Nesim.

**Katy**

As you heard, I find chatting with Nesim so much fun. He's always dropping little nuggets of gold and life-changing hints - like the fine grating of the cheese. I mean it's obvious when you think about it but sometimes it just has to be spelled out by someone with subject matter authority.

If you'd like to learn more about Roman food with Nesim, why not join him on a food tour of Testaccio his local neighborhood? He's in great demand these days so book in early - and I'm talking about next year folks. All the tour details are on our show notes at untolditaly.com/182.

Thanks once again for tuning into Untold Italy. We just love that you listen to us on your walks, road trips, folding laundry and whatever you are doing around the world. And we're so thrilled each time you leave us a 5-star rating and review. It truly makes our day - maybe even more than a pasta dish that's been finished off with the perfect mantecatura!

That’s all for today, Next week we’re talking to a truly inspirational woman about accessible travel in Italy but until then it’s … “ciao for now”.