

Untold Italy Episode 209: Delicious Winter Dishes from Tuscany

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 209.

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 Everyone, I hope you are all well and dreaming of Italy wherever you are in the world. It's supposed to be hot here in Australia as it's summer time but it's not really and I know it's beastly cold in the northern hemisphere. Who knows what's up with the weather these days but one thing is for sure, the people of Tuscany like to stay in touch with the seasons and rhythm of life and the countryside as it moves through each phase of rest, renewal and rebirth. It's something they've practised for generations and it comes as second nature which can be a bit confronting for those of us who can access avocados all year round.

But there is something truly comforting about knowing that the year will progress in certain phases and each one is special and unique in its own way.

Someone who knows a lot about in-season cooking and shares her knowledge and experience far and wide from her beautiful hometown near Siena in Tuscany's Chianti region is our guest today, Giulia SCarpaleggia from Juls Kitchen. Giulia is returning to the show after the huge success of her cookbook *Cucina Povera* which revealed some of her favorite recipes accompanied by her beautiful photography and storytelling.

Giulia's here today to share some of Tuscany's most beloved winter dishes and let you in on some secrets of how to learn to cook them for yourself so let's welcome her back to Untold Italy.

Katy

Bentornata, Giulia. Welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Giulia

Thank you so much. I'm happy to be here again with you.

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Katy

Giulia, thanks so much for coming back. It's such a delight. I loved our chat last time about the spring dishes that you make in Tuscany. Hearing the story, especially of Livia's pear tree, honestly, it's one of my favorite stories on the podcast. Our listeners, you need to go back and listen to [episode 113](#) to hear this beautiful story. You'll love it. Anyway, Giulia, that was some time I feel like you should introduce yourself to our Untold Italy family and let them know all about you and your passions.

Giulia

My name is Giulia Scarpaleggia. I'm a Tuscan food writer and cooking class instructor. I teach cooking classes in my house in between Siena and Florence in the countryside. It's our family house. I have a newsletter, Letters from Tuscany. I write a blog, Jules' Kitchen, that is almost 15 years old. And then I write cookbooks with my husband, Tommaso, is a photographer. Our last cookbook is Cucina Povera, the peasant cuisine of Italy, which was published last year for Artisan Books and should be available everywhere. So that's me making a few sentences.

Katy

Well, you're very modest because you do have an impressive body of work. For someone who's been blogging for a long time also, I don't know exactly how much hard work and dedication goes into everything that you do. It's of such high quality, and I 100% respect what you're doing. Thank you. Why don't you remind everyone about the style of cooking that you focused on your latest cookbook, Cucina Povera, because it is very particular and Italian. I think maybe the closest term we might have in English is home cooking, but it's much, much more than that, isn't it?

Giulia

It's a traditional way of cooking that uses what is available close to you and also has a lot of plant-based dishes because beans and chickpeas were extremely important. It uses all the animals, nose to tail, sustainable fish, and it has a huge respect for leftovers. So this is how you would cook at home using your pantry, Using what you have available, using what is available next door in your vegetable garden. And this is the way I've been cooking, how I learned to cook from my mom, from my grandmother. So a very simple way of cooking, respecting the ingredients.

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Katy

It's so different in a way to the way that many of us live in some of the countries that we're from. I mean, I get absolutely furious if I have to throw things out and I beat myself up. But unfortunately, I do still throw things out. It's really some of these skills have just got lost along the way. Giulia, have you had any professional training or did you learn 100% from your family?

Giulia

From my family. I mean, I follow a couple of cooking classes classes, but then it's mainly learned from my family and from the fact that I love eating. If I want to cook something, I want to learn how to do that, I use cookbooks and videos and ask people. Then I try and experiment and make huge mistakes. My husband can tell you that our food is not always the best at home because there are lots of experiments. Then I come to the recipe that I like. Then I'm happy because teaching cooking classes, I can really try the same recipe with people with different skills. So you understand which are the most crucial steps, what is important to explain, what can be difficult. So I learned cooking and eating, basically.

Katy

That's such a good point. I really like the way that you said that you made a lot of mistakes, because I think sometimes when we try recipes and it doesn't come out the way that we want, we get frustrated and we don't want to try again. But I think that's the whole resilience and keeping on trying is one of those things that you really have to embrace if you're going to cook this way because sometimes things aren't going to work out.

Giulia

Yeah, especially I love baking bread. Now I'm on a pause because I find a very good bakery where I live, so I don't make bread anymore. But baking bread, I tried for sourdough bread for 14 years. My first loaves of bread were like stones, unedible. I reached a point where I was quite happy with my bread. But Tomasso, he really, he can really... He has memories of very heavy unedible bread. So it takes time and patience. In everything, everything in life, writing, photography, cooking, you just need practice and a little bit of commitment, and you have to enjoy it.

Katy

Yeah, a determination. Absolutely. I can just see some of the scenes in your house. This is delicious. My son's always favorite one is, I'm not hungry, mom. But he never says that after his dad's cooking. But anyway. Now, Giulia, midwinter, when I'm talking to you now, it's a time for snuggling and being cozy, I think. And while you can be like, a lot of people look forward to those sunny days of spring, I think there's something to be said for embracing the season and making comforting dishes that are perfect to enjoy after a walk in the crisp winter air. And so I wanted to talk to you today about some of the dishes that you like to cook during winter. And you mentioned that I think first we need to start off with what ingredients are available. And that's, of course, true, because here in Australia, where I live, we get avocados all year round. That's a thing. But in Italy, you don't have that so much. Let's chat about the ingredients that are available at this time of year in winter.

Giulia

We still have pumpkin and squash, fall and winter. This is one of my favorite ingredients. But what is the most typical winter ingredient in Tuscany is Cavolo nero, Tuscan kale. You can start seeing that the Cavolo nero on the market stores beginning of fall, beginning of autumn. But the best Cavolo nero is after the first frost because it becomes softer and a little bit sweeter. Now, generally, we just had a couple of very cold, frost days. This is when you want to eat your Cavolo nero. Cavolo nero is really a great ingredient in soup, in salad, to make pesto, to cook with meat. So it's an incredible ingredient.

Giulia

Then I would say artichokes and artichokes are one of those vegetables that bring you from winter to spring because artichokes are available winter and spring. But this is when I like to fry them, to stew them. So artichox are definitely a great ingredient.

Giulia

And then if you want to move towards baking or sweetening, I would say chestnut flour. To make chestnut flour, you have to wait because you have to dry the chestnut for at least 40 days in a good hot, smoking them, and then you have to grind them into flour. So usually the first flour, the first good flour made from chestnut or marroni, comes around the end of December, the beginning of January. Now is when you can start finding the new chestnut flour to use in your recipes. It is a great ingredient as well.

Katy

I reckon the chestnut flour is a bit like almondmeal. It's better when it's done fresh. If you do it fresh yourself, then it's more delicious. I mean, you don't want to have it hanging around for months and months on end in your cupboard.

Giulia

Yeah, that's why I keep that in the freezer. I used to keep my chestnut flour in the cupboard, and after a couple of months, it has a rancid smell. I really don't want to use the chestnut flour when it has that smell. But if you keep the chestnut flour in the freezer, it doesn't become solid like in a brick. It just tastes perfectly fresh. For over a year. This is how now I keep my chestnut flour, and I can have fresh, fragrant chestnut flour through the year.

Katy

I love it. I was just explaining everyone to Giulia earlier that we're doing a new kitchen. Now I'm thinking we might need a bigger freezer.

Giulia

A bigger freezer.

Katy

I can see that you have a whole drawer for chestnut flour.

Giulia

Yes

Katy

I love it. Okay, so all of those things sound so delicious and all plant-based. I know a lot of people at this time of year are also really concentrating on their health and wanting to make some changes, like eat a bit less meat and stuff. There's really no better ingredient than Cavola nero to get your health kickstart. It's a really delicious vegetable. Giulia, tell us, what can we make with these amazing ingredients?

Giulia

The first thing that comes to my mind is ribollita. Again, another quintessentially Tuscan recipe Ribollita. Ribollita means reboiled because it's a soup. It's a bean and vegetable soup with cannellini beans and cavolo nero. And you make the soup the first day. My grandmother calls that minestra di fagioli like bean soup. When you add the bread, Tuscan bread made out salt and let it soak and let it rest. And maybe the day after you reboil it or sometimes you recook it in the oven, you got the real ribollita, a soup that is thick. You can really stand a spoon into the soup because it has to be thick. And then you have the strings of Cavolo nero and then the beans, and then carrots, potatoes, chard sometimes, of course, onions, and leeks. The bread that makes the soup dense and filling. Is a meal. It's a meal on its own. It's great, it's extremely affordable. Very good for you, very good for the environment. Because, of course, you use what is in season, what you have in your cupboard. And it's like the real cuisine of Tuscany. You finish the soup with a dribble of oil, Olio Nuovo, when you have the Olio Nuovo or very good extra virgin olive oil, and that's it.

Giulia

You're done. It's a great meal on its own.

Katy

No cheese on top? Just olive oil? No.

Giulia

Maybe some fresh, thinly-sliced onion. That's something very good on top of that. Then there are two more dishes very similar to ribollita. There are two soups made with polenta flour and beans. One is Farinata con le Leghe, this is from Pistoia, so near Florence. Leghe is like bonds or ties because the strips of kale, the strips of Cavolo nero, hold the farinata together. And usually this is made with borlotti beans rather than cannellini beans, and it's thicker, not thanks to bread, but thanks to polenta. So this is great like ribollita, but it's also gluten-free because it doesn't have the bread inside.

Giulia

And in Mugello, they have Farinata di Cavolo nero, very similar with less vegetables. It has just onions and leeks in cavolo nero, of course, and cannellini beans. And what I like about this soup is that they make it cool down on a tray. Just like with polenta, you can slice it. And then you can either fry that or bake in the oven. And here, yes, some pecorino on top. It's

great, especially the day after when you can slice it into neat slices, bake them with olive oil and pecorino, like grated pecorino.

Giulia

It's great as a party food or appetizer because it's nice. It's easy to serve and it has everything you need, polenta and beans and Cavolo nero vegetables. It's another great dish.

Katy

That sounds delicious. You don't think of polenta so much in Tuscany. Well, I don't. Maybe I need to be corrected. But they sound delicious recipes. I think when you're talking about them, you're so passionate about them and I love it. I think we've lost our way somehow to value this simplicity because it doesn't sound too tricky to make.

Giulia

No, no, no, exactly.

Katy

But so delicious. Now, if you were going to a trattoria in Tuscany, would you find those dishes there?

Giulia

Ribollita everywhere. Ribollita, especially in the winter, you can find it everywhere in Tuscany. Probably Farinata con le leghe, so the polenta bean soup with the cavolo nero. That's more typical of the area of Pistoia, so you don't find it everywhere. And the same with farinata with cavolo nero is in Mugello. But if you are in the area, you definitely find it. But this is another example of how the Tuscan food that you make at home, it is slightly different from what you can find in restaurants and trattorias because there are recipes, especially made with vegetables, that you don't find in the trattoria menu. You find them at home when people are cooking with what they have in the garden or what they can find at the market.

Katy

Yeah. So they could taste different from one week to the next because it's whatever's available.

Giulia

Yeah, exactly.

Katy

Yummy. Delicious. Okay, so I'm a big fan of the Cavolo nero. It's really delicious. You feel like, proper - you feel like you're getting some strength back into you when you have it. I know I do. So what else can we make in winter?

Giulia

Talking about Cavolo nero, I like to make pesto with Cavolo nero. This is a great way to have... Like Livia, now my daughter, she's three years old. She can eat that pesto. I'm not fooling her. So I'm telling her this is pesto made with Cavolo nero, not with basil. Also because it has a different color and she can really refuse a plate based on the hue of the green. So it's a different green from the basil pesto. But she tried that once and she liked that. I make this pesto with simply sauté the Cavolo nero to make it softer. And then I blend it with almonds and pecorino. And it's a great winter pesto, more affordable than the summer basil also because instead of using pine nuts, I use almonds or sometimes walnuts. And it's great on pasta. I can freeze it so I can prepare a big batch of pasta and have that ready through the winter. Sometimes I finish the pasta with a few cubes of fried guanciale. Here, pork. I'm introducing pork. I think it's a great combination.

Katy

I'd have to try that one. Oh, my goodness. I think you could get anyone to eat Cavolo nero if you had it with guanciale. But everything tastes better with bacon, is a saying. Yes. Oh, wow. That does sound delicious. Actually, I would love to try that. I think pesto is one of those things that it just got put into a jar here in Australia and probably the States as well. It's meant to be made fresh. There's a reason. You will never, ever get the flavor from a jar, ever. You got to try and make it, everyone. Try some different combinations of nuts and greens and cheese. I mean, you can use that for antipasti as well, right? Oh, yes.

Giulia

On top of bread, maybe with a soft white egg on top or a little anchovies. It's a great antipasti as well.

Katy

I told you I've just had dinner and I'm really hungry now. Oh, my goodness. All right. What else can we make in winter?

Giulia

The last recipe, Cavolo Nero, I promise. I was mentioning pork before for guanciale, but a traditional recipe that you can find also in Artusi's cookbook, Artuzi is the father of Italian cuisine. This cookbook is 100 years old and still a lot used in this house. It is Scamerita. Scamerita is a slice of pork. Usually it's from the neck of the pork, so it's fat and delicious. And that's Scamerita is cooked with red wine and cavolo nero. So it's a great combination of pork and cavolo nero. And this is also the best moment to have this, not only because cavolo nero is great after the first roast, because usually here in Italy, it's connected to the butchering of pork, especially January the 17th, it was Saint Anthony, and it was the day when the pork will be butchered. And so there are many recipes traditionally connected to this ceremony in Italy. Think about Casella in the north of Italy or another recipe from Abruzzo, pork (maiale) Cif e Ciaf, so like pieces of pork cooked with oil and herbs. The same this Scamerita, this pork neck, cooked with red wine and Cavolo nero, will be perfect in January.

Katy

Would you serve that with anything or I don't know. I feel like we always go, Right, where's the carbs?

Giulia

Carbs would be pasta that you can have before or some good bread. Or why not some polenta here? That would be nice as well.

Katy

Delicious. Yeah, I think it's really interesting. Maybe when people go to Italy, they always think they're going to have a four-course meal, which is not true. Although I have to say it's hard to resist. But when you go out to a restaurant, you don't have to always order the four courses.

Giulia

No, no. This is something everyone asks me during cooking classes. How do you order at a restaurant? Do you have to order the four courses? No, no. Usually, when I go to a restaurant with friends, we might have antipasti and share them. Then everyone picks a dish that could be primi, so pasta or rice or secondi, so meat or fish. Or if I go with my husband, We can have one appetizer, one primo, one secondo, and share them. At the restaurant, they know that you can do that. They expect you to do that. Sometimes they stop you when you start ordering appetizer in first course and second course and say, Are you sure? Absolutely, yes. You can pick what you prefer in a menu. You're not forced to have from every category.

Katy

Yeah, that's a really good advice. I think it's so tempting, though, to try everything. But if you've got a group, then you definitely share the dishes around. Although sometimes when you get a premium pasta, I really don't want to share pasta, a really special version made down in Cilento. I just keep dreaming about that. My son said to me that was one of his top three meals of last year, and I don't think anyone would have shared that one.

Giulia

Wow.

Katy

It's so good. The things you can do with Cavolo nero - amazing, wonderful. Are you sure you don't have any more recipes for that?

Giulia

I can have another one. This recipe is what convinced my mom to eat Cavolo nero. She's very picky. She doesn't eat a lot of vegetables, and she was sure she wouldn't like Cavolo nero. But then I made a salad with raw Cavolonero, so cleanly spread without the stalks. And then I dress this salad with finely chopped walnuts and hazelnuts, and then olive oil, vinegar, and a bit of honey. This is a very nice side dish, especially next to roast chicken or pork. You can make this in advance, have the Cavolo nero ready, the nuts ready, and you assemble maybe one hour before you're going to eat that to soften the Cavolo nero. You have to massage it with oil and vinegar to make it more digestible. And yes, this is my last recipe with Cavolo nero, but this is something very nice, worth trying.

Katy

Would you toast the nuts?

Giulia

Yes.

Katy

I think anything that's massaged, including myself, is always better. I respect the Cavolo nero for being massaged, but I'm going to try that because that sounds delicious. That sounds exactly what the type of thing that I like to eat. I like to eat a little bit of meat with some salad. That's my favorite dinner. That's a good one to try. Obviously, if you can get it into your picky mother, then maybe I can try a couple of 10-year-olds as well.

Giulia

Yeah, it might work.

Katy

Okay, Giulia, what else should we try in winter? There's so many things.

Giulia

What we make often at home is Passato di fagioli or Passato di ceci. So like bean soup or chickpea soup, stripped down to the most essential ingredients: garlic, chickpeas, and rosemary. We are very strict about pairing beans and herbs. Beans, they have to go with sage. Chickpeas, they have to go with rosemary. This is what my mom taught me. I know that in other families it's different. This is how it works in my house. Already boiled chickpeas, already boiled beans. What I do is I simply fry some garlic in olive oil, and then I remove the garlic and I add the beans with their cooking water and maybe a teaspoon of tomato paste to turn everything into a pinkish soup, and then I blend it. That's a soup done. Nothing else. You can top it with bread croûtons, or you can add some farro or rice, or you can cook short pasta like Ditalini or broken spaghetti in the soup. But this is warming and very simple, very smooth. This is something we often make at home. It can be chickpeas or it can be beans. More often beans than chickpeas.

Katy

Mmm, delicious. Chickpeas are really good because they've got lots of protein in them as well. I really love them. Anything to do with chick peas? Hummus? Anything? That sounds yum. I want to try that. Is that in your cookbook, that one?

Giulia

This is in my newsletter. Yes, this is in the newsletter.

Katy

Ah, okay Another soup. What else can we try?

Giulia

Artichoke in every way. It could be fried artichokes or artichokes frittata. That's a great weeknight meal, frittata, like an omelet with vegetables. For us, eggs are dinner, not breakfast. Sometimes I have them for breakfast, but traditionally, we have eggs for dinner or for lunch. When you don't have time, you want to make something quick. You can simply cut the artichokes into thin wedges, fry the wedges of artichokes with some flour in olive oil, and then pour a couple of beaten eggs on top. And that's a frittata with Carciofi, with artichokes. That's a frittata with our Carciofi, with artichokes. That's a very simple easy dinner. Or you can stew the artichokes with oil and white wine and herbs, and that becomes a great side dish. Or you can make a risotto with artichokes. My grandmother used to make a risotto with artichokes and pieces of prosciutto cotto, the cooked ham. It was a great dish. Or you can stuff artichokes. My grandmother, I learned to cook from her, as you can understand, she used to stuff the artichokes with bread crumbs and tuna, canned tuna, and pecorino. So I know everyone says, You shouldn't pair this we say this in Italy, cheese and fish, but there are many exceptions, and this dish is an exception.

Giulia

I like tuna, canned tuna, and bread crumbs and pecorino all mixed together, stuffed into the artichokes. Then you cook the artichokes in a pan with olive oil and water. It's a great dish.

Katy

Wow. It's really interesting. I don't think we have them so much here in Australia. It's becoming more popular, but I know many of our listeners from the United States are very

interested to learn more and taste artichokes when they're in Italy. Do you find that with your classes?

Giulia

Yes. Always when we go to the market, can we have artichokes? Yes, of course. If they're in season, that would be my first choice. In our last class, we had artichokes two ways. One was carpaccio, so thinly slice with extra virgin olive oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper. You can add some shaved Parmigiano if you want. Then we have our Carciofi da Romana, so stew artichokes with garlic and mint and parsley and olive oil and white wine.

Katy

Yeah, I wonder why. I mean, they are such a unique-looking vegetable, aren't they? I think they look a bit daunting to a lot of people. It's like, How do I eat them? How do I cook them? You've just given us about 10 ways to do that. It's something everyone should have a go at. It's very interesting as well because I think most people associate artichokes with Roman cooking, and maybe not Tuscan cuisine, but there you go. Giulia has just shown us it's very big in Tuscany, too. They're very versatile, aren't they? You can fry stuff. Maybe you should do a cookbook about artichokes.

Giulia

Really, it's easy to get to 100 recipes with artchokes.

Katy

Oh, goodness. Is there any other more main type dishes that you would eat and cook in winter?

Giulia

Spezzatino. So like a stew, where usually it's beef. When I can find that, the cheek of the beef, which is my favorite part for this spezzatino. It's a thing for la fiorentina, you cook the meat for two, three hours with tomato sauce, first with some red wine, and you can add potatoes and carrots. So that's a main course that I make, especially in the winter.

Giulia

Or Ossobuco, something I make in the winter. Or what I would do, if my husband that didn't hate it, that would be tripa, so the tripe. That's another typical stew of the winter season. Very typical in Florence, just like as it is in Milan, in Rome. So tripa is very typical, it's quinto quarto, so offal. Something extremely affordable, sustainable to eat because you eat the whole animal, not just the filet, and it's delicious. It's comforting and creamy and velvety. There's a very unique texture, I know, that almost reminds you of squid, but I think you should be brave for once and try it because the flavor is not strong, as you can imagine. It's actually delicious. Yes. So tripa. Tripa is something I would do now in winter.

Katy

Well, I've tried in Rome, the Pajata, which is sheep's intestines, and also in Florence, I've tried the Lampredotto. I think you do just need to block out from your mind what it is that you're eating. Yeah, it is the texture that gets to people. I think it's not the taste, because the taste is actually delicious. It's such a critical part of the Cucina Povera, isn't it? The tripe and the entrails. You need to use everything.

Giulia

Exactly. It's a respectful way of eating the animal.

Katy

Exactly. Yeah, beautiful. Well, does anyone have room for dessert after all of that?

Giulia

Please have room because I have some options for you.

Katy

Okay.

Giulia

Okay, so I mentioned chestnut. Chestnuts are a great winter ingredient, the flour or the chestnut on its own. Of course, chestnut on its own has a very short season because you can have them maybe for about one month. But when you have the flour, you can make a great

dessert that is Castagnaccio. Castagnaccio is a recipe that's very ancient, but it's extremely modern because it's a recipe that is on its own, gluten-free, vegan, and sugar-free. It's made with Chestnut flour, water, raisins, pine nuts, sometimes walnuts, and then olive oil and rosemary. Super simple. It is an acquired taste. So this is something I always remember people during my cooking classes. It's smoky with the texture of bread pudding, crispy on the outside, not overly sweet, but I grew up eating Castagnaccio, so I absolutely love the flavor of Castagnaccio. Livia, so I remember you, three years old, she loves it. So sometimes she has Castagnaccio for breakfast. And if I want to make it a little bit more gentle, I serve the Castagnaccio with some ricotta and I whip the ricotta with some sugar so that maybe it's more easy as the first bite. But then usually everyone loves Castagnaccio because it's modern and delicious.

Katy

Giulia, would you find that... As my family is quite the connoisseur of an Italian buffet breakfast, so if you stay at an agriturismo or a hotel or a B&B, often they'll have cakes for breakfast. Would this be something that you'd find in Tuscany in the winter months?

Giulia

Not in a typical breakfast. This is something that we sometimes have at home when we have leftovers from maybe. We have lunch or dinner. We like to have Castagnaccio for breakfast when we have leftovers. We wouldn't make that specifically for breakfast, for a traditional breakfast, because then I like that for breakfast because it's healthy without sugar, maybe with some hazelnut butter on top or almond butter.

Katy

Yeah, delicious. So it would be eaten after a meal, so it's more of a dessert.

Giulia

Or even street food, because often they make Castagnaccio in pizzerias where you can get pizza al taglio, or chickpea cake or Castagnaccio. Because of course, when you make Castagnaccio in a wood burning oven, it's even better. Sometimes you can have a slice of castagnaccio from a pizzeria. Or I like to prepare Castagnaccio in a different way for Christmas. I cut discs of Castagnaccio and then almost like in a sandwich, I put ricotta with candied orange peel and chocolate chips in between, and then ice and sugar on top. So a kind

of Castagnaccio sandwich with ricotta, and it looks very nice and elegant. So it's a great way of serving Castagnaccio during the festivities because it's unusual, but everyone loves it.

Katy

Every time you think you know a lot about Italian food and different regional dishes, there's always something new to learn. There's always something, and it's just outstanding. I love it. It's just even the little tweaks that people do by region. It's fantastic. If there's one time, though, in winter, which is the popular for eating a lot, though, it's a particular time in February, isn't it?

Giulia

Yeah, Carnevale. The only reason why I love Carnevale is rice fritters. I don't like Carnevale, but I do love the Carnevale sweet treats. So I'm excited because I think in a couple of days in Siena, they will put a hut in Piazza del Campo where they fry the local rice fritters. So rice fritters in Siena are different from rice fritters from Florence. My husband and I, we always argue because I believe that the best rice fritters are those from Siena, as I'm from Colle val d'Elsa, near Siena. He's from Florence, and he loves rice fritters from Florence. So we came to an agreement - we buy rice fritters from Siena, and I make rice fritters from Florence. That's what will keep peace in the family.

Giulia

In the rice fritters from Florence, you got the actual grains of rice. They are dense. Sometimes they have raisins inside, and they are sweet and covered with sugar. In Siena, it is totally different. In Siena, the rice fritters were typical of St. Joseph, the 19th of March. But now they are associated to Carnevale as well. Half of January, you start finding the rice fritters, and they go up to St. Joseph in March. They are made with, we can call it, fermented rice because they make the rice three, four days in advance and cook the rice in water. Then they have orange zest, a pinch of salt, no sugar in the dough, but just on the outside. They fry these fritters like dropping tablespoons of this rice, sticky dough into cauldrons with hot oil. Then you can have one, two, four. They're all one attached to the other. Then they sprinkle that with sugar and you have to eat them steaming hot. Now, I'm salivating thinking about the rice fritters. It's one year. Last time I had them. And they are incredible. Also because the location when you have them, you don't usually have these rice fritters everywhere in Siena, just in this hut in Piazza de Campo. And then there are, I think, two more locations outside of Siena, the famous Frittelle Savelli. So everyone waits for those.

They are incredible. So this is something you eat just during winter in Tuscany. In Siena, not in Tuscany. In Siena.

Katy

Amazing. Giulia, I just found the article that you wrote over 10 years ago on your blog about this very thing. We'll put this in our show notes because the way that Giulia has described going through the streets and having the cold crisp air and then coming out onto Piazza Del Campo is a beautiful piece of writing, and the photography is amazing as well. There's a stunning shot of Piazza Del Campo with snow all over it, too.

Giulia

Very unusual.

Katy

Yeah, very unusual, but still very beautiful, too. Oh, my goodness. Yeah, I'm hungry now. In a few days, you'll be rushing into Siena to see if the huts up, I guess.

Giulia

Yes. Because with my husband, we were checking if they were already there or not. That's usually not a day trip. I mean, it takes half an hour to get there. But we make sure to go there at least twice during this time to have the rice fritters. It's a tradition now. I love this moment because I went to university in Siena. This was the exam time, usually. February was our midterm exams. We would have our exams. Then the afternoon after my last exam was the moment when I would go and pick all the fritters and sit in Piazza de Campo and enjoy the sun because I was feeling spring coming in the air and the rice fritters. It was pure joy. That's why I still love the rice fritters for these days.

Katy

Connecting these different foods to special memories. It's something that I think people have it tucked away somewhere. I love the way you are able to tease them out all the time and relate it back to what it is in your life. Yeah, it's really beautiful. I really feel like tasting those fritters. They look delicious. The people that make it, is this a tradition? Is this like they're older people? Are people going to be continuing this tradition?

Giulia

Yeah, it's a pastry shop, a bakery that is doing this. There are also new people, but they have this secret recipe. They are the only one that are able to do the recipe for the rice fritters this way. Because then the rice fritters are hollow inside. They are not dense like the fritters in Florence. They're almost hollow and creamy and crisp on the outside with all the sugar. It's an experience you have to try.

Katy

You have to go to Siena in winter. There's so many good reasons to come to Tuscany in winter. We're just covering the food today. But I mean, that whole I'd love to see the Piazza Del Campo in snow. I do understand that that doesn't happen every winter, maybe. Giulia, do you have any more sweets for us that eat?

Giulia

Okay, the last one. Okay, Cenci. So the fried dough rags, Cenci means rags. They are called all over Italy in different names. Chiacchiere, galani, frappe, so it's very typical carnival. But then something very typical of Florence is Schiacciata alla Fiorentina, or as my family from Florence, they call it Schiacciata Unta, like grease Schiacciata. It's not the typical focaccia you made in sweet. It's Unta, grease, because it was traditionally made with lard, not with butter, not with olive oil, but with lard. Then it has vanilla and it has orange zest. It's typical of this moment of the year because this is when the lard was available. Again, this connects the recipe back to what we were talking about before about the butchering of pork. Also, the way this is made is typical in to rectangular trace, very thin. And in some of almost all the pastry shops in Florence, they make it stuffed with cream or with pastry cream and cream, and it's great. And every year in Florence, there's a competition to know who makes the best Schiacciata alla Fiorentina. I've been once a judge for this competition, one of the happiest moments of my life because we were forced to try 17 different Schiacciata.

Giulia

And there was a great, great afternoon, I remember. But every year I like to try at least one or two different ones because it's... Again, one of the reasons why I love carnival. I don't like carnival because it's the last obstacle before spring. I'm not very much into Carnivale costumes and so on. I think I'll have to change my mind now with a three-year-old daughter. But definitely the fritters and the Schiacciata alla Fiorentina, they make me love Carnivale a little bit. Well, you've got to find a way.

Katy

I think that's why a lot of people like Christmas because all the traditional foods come out and Easter as well. But I think what's really special in Italy is that you have even these micro moments. Carnevale is a big celebration, but these feasts, these saints feasts, and these typical traditions that go on in these special days and around these special moments is really... I love this connection to the rhythm of life and just making those little moments that build up every year. As you've done with your family, create those traditions so that it's continuing on for your daughter. I think it's beautiful. I try and do similar traditions in our house. But the beautiful thing about Italy is a lot of it's already built in and it's been happening for centuries.

Katy

Now, Giulia, if people love the sound of all of this, then they should come and visit Tuscany in winter, shouldn't they?

Giulia

Exactly.

Katy

Because a part of our not so secret agenda here on Untold Italy is to spread out the travel, everyone. You don't need to go all the time in summer. We understand that a lot of people don't have much of a choice. But if you're someone that loves food and traditions and culture, then there's definitely so much to do in winter. And even Giulia has got something for you to do, haven't you, Giulia?

Giulia

Yeah. So we used to give classes, especially summer. But now with a young daughter and with the summer getting hotter and hotter and hotter every year, we try to move our classes also to fall and winter season. And now we have our master classes, usually October, November, December, and January. Maybe next year, also February and March, we'll see. Instead of one-day cooking class, we have three-day experience. We start with Wednesday, where we shop at the market for all the food we need for the three days and at the butcher. Then every day, we define a menu with the people that attend the class. So nothing is fixed. Everything is

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decided on the moment according to what we find according to what people want to learn or their preferences.

Giulia

I live in Colle di Val d'Elsa, that is a small town, but it's basically half an hour from Siena, San Gimignano, Volterra, and then one hour from Florence and a little bit more from Lucca or from Val d'Orcia. So what I suggest people is take a week and maybe take our three-day class. You are free in the afternoon.

Giulia

Colle di Val d'Elsa is a quiet town, but with so many restaurants. We go from very nice trattorias a two Michelin star restaurant. So really, if you have some room left after our meals, you can have an incredible dinner then in Colle di Val d'Elsa and explore the surroundings.

Giulia

You can quickly go to San Gimignano or Volterra when nobody's there. Last week, I had a family from Holland, and they took the master class, and they went to Volterra, and they said, It's true, it's all covered in mist in winter. It was magical. And this is something you experience just in the winter, like Volterra covered in mist or San Gimignano with empty streets. It's magical. Of course, not everything is open. It might rain. This is the kinds of traveling in winter. But if you love food, this is definitely the season you want to be in Tuscany.

Katy

Absolutely. That mist, it's a photographer's dream. It really is quite beautiful and ethereal. It's just stunning. I think we need to, with all this climate change, you're right, Giulia, I think we need to just be a little bit open-minded. Some of these dishes, I know a lot of people come to Tuscany to try Bistecca alla Fiorentina, I feel like eating that much meat in summer...

Giulia

No, exactly.

Katy

It's more of a winter-type experience, each to their own. But for me, the winter, then you can go outside for a brief walk and you just go, That was delicious. Exactly. Well, everyone, if you'd like to join Giulia in one of her master classes or her cooking classes, then you definitely should, because apart from her amazing generosity in terms of, you know that it's going to be an incredible experience. You just need to take one look at her website. She's got literally hundreds of, maybe thousands of recipes on her website. They're all beautifully shot. Then obviously, she has her cookbooks as well. Giulia, thank you so much for sharing the magic of Tuscany and its dishes in winter. Look, I really am ready to head to a trip to the Sienese Hills.

Katy

Look, I know everyone will want to know more about you and Jules' Kitchen, so how can they follow you, learn about your delicious recipes, and stay in touch with everything that you're doing.

Giulia

Now, the place where we share most of our new recipes and content and stories is the newsletter. Letters from Tuscany on Substack. Otherwise, I'm Jules' Kitchen on the blog and also on Instagram. That's it. We have also podcast. It's been going a couple of years, but there are about 50 episodes you can listen to. It's cooking with Italian accent because I speak English with an Italian accent and I cook with an Italian accent. That's also another interesting way to get to know us a little bit better. Then you can always send me an email and I'm happy to answer.

Katy

You're so generous and it's really very much appreciated. Everyone, take a little trip, a little virtual trip to Tuscany and check in with Giulia, and we'll get her back on the podcast again soon for another chat. Giulia, thank you so much for joining us on Untold Italy today.

Giulia

Thank you. It's been fun as always. Grazie. Grazie. Ciao, ciao.

Katy

I hope you enjoyed this insight into the rhythm of life and favorite winter dishes of Tuscany that Giulia shared. Her commitment to the traditional dishes of her region is so inspiring to me. We live in a culture where so many things are available on demand that I think it makes us a little impatient and dare I say it entitled. When you don't have access to something then you have to make do and be creative and as we've seen, some beautiful things come from that.

If you'd like to learn more about Giulia and Jul's kitchen and perhaps learn to make some of the dishes Giulia mentioned or join one of her cooking classes, you'll find all the information about her cooking school and book at untolditaly.com/209. And a little surprise for our Tuscany in Spring and Fall travelers - you'll be joining Giulia in her kitchen as part of our tours of this beautiful area of Tuscany as part of our trip activities. So exciting. As I mentioned, every time I talk to Giulia I'm inspired to do better with my attention to seasonal produce and try new things in the kitchen.

Thanks to all our wonderful listeners for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did then we would so appreciate it if you took the time to rate or review our show so we can help the people at Apple and Spotify or wherever you listen to your podcasts show our little online corner of Italy to more travelers just like you.

That's all for today. Next week, we're going to have about food etiquette and the manners of eating in Italy with my good friend and popular podcast guest Nesim from Full Belly Tours but until then it's "ciao for now".