

Untold Italy Episode 211: Eating Out In Italy - Etiquette Tips and More

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 211.

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! Hi friends. Hope you're well. I'm just about to head off for Italy again where I'll visit Rome and Venice and attend a travel conference in Berlin, Germany. I've been checking the weather a lot and it's going to be pretty chilly but I don't mind, that's perfect pasta-eating weather and I love getting out my winter coat and feeling cozy.

One person I'm planning to catch up with when I'm there is our guest today. Back with us on the show is my friend, former chef and Roman food expert Nesim Bekalti who runs Full Belly Food Tours in Rome. Nesim is a very popular guest on the podcast thanks to our episodes on Roman pasta and finding the best restaurants in Rome.

Today he's going to share his best tips for navigating food etiquette - something that most Italians are very passionate about. If you want a good laugh sign up to the Italians Mad at Food group on Facebook and you'll see what I mean. Anyway, no one wants to be on the receiving end of a mad Italian angry at your food etiquette so by the end of this episode you'll know how to avoid glares at the market and strange looks at restaurants .. let's get started as this is important!

Katy

Bentornato, Nesim. Welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Nesim

Thank you so much, Katy. It's a pleasure to be back.

Katy

It's always, always a pleasure to have you on. How have you been? What's happening in Rome? Tell us everything.

Nesim

I've been great. Last year was an incredible year. Had a very restorative break, went to see family in the US, and gearing up for, hopefully, even more exciting one.

Katy

Why don't you tell everyone exactly what you do? Because there might have been some people that have missed you. I don't know how, but let's just remind everyone.

Nesim

So, I give food tours in Rome. My company is called Full Belly Tours. I actually grew up here in Rome in a neighborhood called Testaccio, which is the birthplace of traditional Roman cuisine. I basically show people around my neighborhood and feed them lots of delicious, wonderful traditional Roman dishes while I tell you a bit about the history of the neighborhood, the city, and that kind of fun stuff.

Katy

It's fantastic. I'm kinda losing I'm track of how many times I've done that tour with you now, Nesim. But it's always good, it's always fresh. I don't know, somehow we always try a different pizza. I don't even know how we manage that, given how much pizza we try. But it's always delicious.

Nesim

If I do get repeat visitors, I try to mix it up so you don't get the exact same thing every time. Luckily, food is very seasonal here. Depending on what time of year you're doing a tour, you're probably going to run in two different seasonal dishes as well. But yeah, there's lots of goodies to be enjoyed.

Katy

Last time I was there, they were filming a film in your neighborhood, weren't they? We had to dodge the movie set on all the actors and everything that was going on. It was lots of fun.

Nesim

Yeah, especially because it was set in the '40s, so you had the mock market, you had all of the cars, you had everyone in costume. Very entertaining.

Katy

Yeah, they look cool. Okay, so Nesim, I know a lot of people get a bit concerned about etiquette in general when they're coming to Italy and they want to read up about what's the cultural norms and how to manage it. But food etiquette may be on a whole other level, and that's because Italians are so passionate about the way that they eat and work with food or their customs. I think the funniest thing that I've ever seen is, I don't know if you've seen this group on Facebook, it's called Italians Mad at Food.

Nesim

Yes, it's hilarious.

Katy

I think if anyone wants to understand how passionate people are about food, then they should go and check out that site because it's like they get very angry if people mess with the Alfredo or we even attempt an Alfredo, in fact.

Nesim

Yeah, definitely. Italians are very particular when it comes to their food. A lot of people think about Italian food, but that's a misnomer because like any other country, food is very regional, but much more so in Italy. And so wherever you are, there's going to be specific dishes, specific cold cuts, specific wines, and what maybe is considered right in one place may not be in another. And they can be very sensitive about their food and can easily get upset even if you're a paying customer. I joke that they often act like they invited you in out of the cold and they're feeding you out of the kindness of their hearts, in which case, sure, get upset if I do something wrong. But if I'm an unwitting visitor, maybe be a little more

understanding and don't admonish me as if I'm your four-year-old that's doing something wrong with my food, which can sometimes, unfortunately, be the case.

Katy

All right. We've established that it's important to get things right. So where do we start? How do we go about this? Because I don't think anyone wants to offend anyone. Not that you're going to offend anyone, but there's better ways of doing things.

Nesim

No, absolutely. So the first and most important thing is how to address people. Because in Italian, like many other romance languages, there's the formal way of addressing someone and the informal way of addressing someone. For example, when you're saying you, the formal way is to say lei, which, to be confusing, also means her. But it's like in French, when you say vous and tu, it both means you, but one is the polite and one is the formal. If you want to greet someone, it's always best, it's always a good idea to use the formal and to use lei. The easiest way to address someone is to say, Excuse me, which in formally, you would say, Mi scusi, whereas if you're saying it informally, you say, Scusa. Now, with younger people, you can often address them in the informal way. You can say tu, you can say scusa. But as I said, it's always a good idea to be polite in general. The more familiar or informal the setting, the more it's acceptable and almost expected that you use the more informal way of addressing someone. If you're dealing with older people, it's always nice to use the formal, to use lei, because that denotes respect.

Nesim

When opening a conversation, like you would if you're addressing someone in English, you say, Excuse me, or hello. You open the conversation. You don't just walk in with the thing you want. It's important to actually address the person that's serving you. Also in great part because Italians are known for being warm and friendly, and they value that. It's one of the things that makes living in this country so much fun. People are actually nice to each other on a regular basis. So reciprocate that. If you walk up to an Italian person, open with, "Hello, excuse me". Especially if you're taking the time to learn how to order things in Italian, learn the words that can come before and after, please, thank you, that stuff. I mean, it makes sense depending on where you live. If an Italian person just walked in and barked an order at you, you might not react to that very warmly. And it's understandable. I think most people don't even realize that they're doing it. When traveling, we often get caught up in what we're trying to achieve in the moment and can therefore forget the human interaction part. Just

remember that you're always dealing with humans, and it's always a good idea to be nice in general, even if you're not on vacation or traveling, which sometimes, sometimes people can forget when dealing with people in the service sector.

Nesim

Yes, they're working, but they're also humans, so it's a good idea to be nice. Also because you're going to get better service and you're going to get people that react to you better that way. It's always a good idea to open with a greeting. A smile always helps. And so preface with Scusa or Mi scussi is the easiest way to get someone's attention. And please, thank you. All of that stuff is nice. Having said that, I'm now I'm going to cover various scenarios and how you might be expected to act or what the normal way of going about dealing with people in certain situations. These are obviously all tied to food. I'll be covering the various types of establishments you may find yourself in and what the customary norms are for those establishments. These are ones that you'll find in most of the country.

Katy

Just to reiterate, I think it's just, yeah, I like humans. I wouldn't be doing this job otherwise. You're so right. You do get a bit transactional when you're traveling, but just try and breathe and smile because the international language of the smile is really an amazing icebreaker, really. If anyone's been on tour with Nesim, they'll know he's got an amazing smile that he shares with everyone.

Nesim

Thank you very much.

Katy

It gets you a lot of places. I'm sure it's got you a lot of free tastings over the years. Things like that.

Nesim

No, absolutely. It disarms the person. If you come up and smile at someone, they're like, Okay, you're starting off. You're already conveying so much without even saying anything.

Katy

Exactly. Yeah.

Nesim

So normally you would start your day with breakfast, which in Italy happens in a bar. In Italy, a bar is café. They do serve alcohol, but it's where you would normally start your day with breakfast. Keep in mind that breakfast is quick and efficient, possibly the only thing that is quick and efficient in this country. And so there's a set way to do things, especially if it's a very busy bar in the morning, where people will normally be consuming at the counter. The coffees aren't that big. We don't have a really sipping coffee culture. It's more the coffee is small, intense. It's a couple of sips, even a cappuccino isn't that big, and you may have multiple throughout the day. But it's normally a very quick transaction. So first and foremost, it's important to know that you should pay first for whatever it is that you want, and then you use that receipt to get your food, because otherwise, you're just going to be wasting time. If you wait at the counter, then they'll ask you what you want, you haven't paid, and you have to go then wait in line and do that whole transaction.

Nesim

So pay first, and then you bring the receipt and you put it down on the counter when they ask you what you want. It's actually customary, if you want to be nice, to put a 10 or 20 cent coin on the receipt when you put it down on the counter. That's considered the tip. And that's the norm. If you want to leave more, that's obviously appreciated. But it's something that as a visitor, they won't expect you to do, and they'll already start seeing you a little more favorably.

Nesim

There's also the question of where you will be consuming your breakfast. So most Italians consume their breakfast at the bar, in part because breakfast is quick, but also because it's cheaper that way. On average in Italy, an Espresso is about €1. That same Espresso, if you choose to sit at the table, in which case you need to sit down and they'll come and take your order when you're seated, you wouldn't buy yourself at the counter and then sit down because it has a different cost. If you're sitting down, that coffee may cost you double. That being said, if you're sitting in a café in Piazza San Marco in Venice or in Piazza Navona, you're liable to spend 10 times what you would if you're consuming that there, that same coffee at the bar.

Nesim

So keep that in mind, you're basically paying for the luxury of sitting in these world-famous squares.

Katy

So don't knock that coffee down so fast. Enjoy. Like - drag it out.

Nesim

Exactly. Yeah. And it's one of the reasons why you'll see often the older Italians sitting there with one coffee, sipping it very slowly. You're trying to maximize your time there. Also know, and I'm sure many of you have heard this, but cappuccino is considered breakfast food. If you ask for a cappuccino after 11:00 AM, you may get some pushback. Honestly, you're traveling, you're on vacation. If you want a cappuccino after 11:00 AM, please feel free to ask for it. I'm a big fan of people doing what they want when they're on vacation, obviously within societal norms. But don't be surprised if they raise your eyebrows if you ask for a cappuccino in the afternoon.

Nesim

And a fun thing that I think most people don't know about coffee service in Italy, you can actually ask for your coffee *al vetro*, which means in a glass. And instead of having the little ceramic coffee cup, they'll give you what looks essentially like a little shot glass. The pros of that is you can see the coffee, for one, and so you can gauge the quality. And to the Italians that consume coffee in a bar, the magic of that coffee is what we call *la crema*, which is the cream of essential oils that collects at the top of the espresso. Since the cup for the *al vetro* is thinner in diameter, you're going to get more of that cream, or it's going to seem like you get more of it. The con is that theoretically the glass cools quicker and it turns bitter, quicker, whatever. But if you see people drinking coffee in little glass cups instead of the ceramic one, they ask for it *al vetro*, which may be a fun thing to try. If you're particularly brave or celebratory that day, know that they have something called a *Caffe Corretto*, which means a corrected coffee, which is an espresso with a half a shot of your liquor of choice. Something to keep in mind.

Katy

Breakfast of champions.

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Nesim

Yes, absolutely. It will make your day more merry.

Katy

I'm going to add Katy's tip. I've noticed this, and it's a bit shocking, unfortunately, in my last trip to Italy. If the bar has a machine that's not an Espresso machine making the coffees, just leave, because unfortunately, there are some terrible coffees being made out of machines. I'm not going to name names or make any shameful revelations, but it seems like the further north you go, the lazier they get when it comes to coffee.

Nesim

Your words, not mine. I would agree wholeheartedly, but there's some, I don't want to say animosity, but between north and south, we may differ on how we see things, let's say.

Katy

Well, I'm sorry, but I will actually learn a few things. Thanks, Nesim. I think maybe after a bit of jet lag, you might be in need of a *caffè*.

Nesim

I often like to have one maybe it's like a mid-afternoon snack. Pairing it with Baileys will give you the creaminess and sweetness in and of itself. That's a nice little fun afternoon interlude from time to time. A little. Yeah, definitely.

Nesim

Now, after breakfast, you may go food shopping. We can now talk about how to act in a market. We are very, very lucky in Italy to have a very big market culture. There's more and more little supermarkets that are starting to replace them, unfortunately, but we're very, very lucky to still be able to shop on a very regular basis in markets. Nearly every neighborhood will have its own market, but therefore, you should know how to properly act. First and foremost, don't just walk up to a vendor and start touching the fruit. That's something that is going to drive the vendor insane. If you see people doing it, those are the regulars that go to that place on a daily basis and they're allowed to, they have earned the right to choose their own vegetables. Normally, you're going to ask for assistance, and they will buy the stuff for you. What is nice, if you're serious about buying something small, like

grapes or cherry tomatoes, things like that, you can ask to try one to see if it's got the desired brightness, sweetness, whatever.

Nesim

Sometimes even the vendor will offer for you to try. But always start out asking for assistance. They may then tell you, Go ahead and do your own thing, but you should in no way just walk up and start serving yourself. It's considered very rude, especially if you don't even acknowledge the vendors.

Nesim

So once again, you show up, always a good idea to say hello. You're acknowledging them, you're letting them know that you're interested in what they're selling, and they will definitely appreciate that. Know that even within the space of a week, a couple of days that you're in a place, the more and more frequently you buy from a specific vendor, the more freedom you'll have. The more they'll appreciate you, the more they know who you are, the more okay they'll be with letting you do your thing. And this also has to do with pride. Now, by going back to a vendor repeatedly, you're telling them that you really appreciate and like what it is that they're selling, and it Italians are very proud when it comes, in general, but especially when it comes to food and drink. So you're validating that what they're selling is amazing and they'll like you more because of that.

Nesim

Now, ordering can sometimes be confusing as far as what quantity you can buy things in, and the price will help you a lot. Look at the price and see how it's being sold. Normally, in a market setting, they're going to be selling things by the kilo which is about 2lb if you work with the American system. But sometimes, especially for more expensive things, they'll sell things by the 100 grams, which is called an etto in Italian, E-T-T-O, the English word is hectogram, but no one uses it, which is about a quarter pound.

Nesim

There's also certain items that will be sold and priced by the unit, which is al prezzo or luno. Look at the price and it'll tell you how to order. Another thing you can do to ensure that you're buying the best possible version of what you're getting is to tell them when it's for. So for example, if you're buying stone fruit, melons, persimmons, things that can ripen very quickly and can get very soft, if you're buying something even for the day after, let them

know and they'll give you one that will be ripe on the day. Plus, they'll be very impressed you know this because they don't expect you as a visitor to know that you can order stuff for the day you want to consume it in. So just tell them when it's for. This is for today. I would also like a couple for two days from now.

Katy

It's making me laugh because at our greengrocer, I really wish we'd have that service because what happens is everyone is going around and we do not have the do not touch rule either. Everyone's squeezing the fruit to try and get to their own judgment of when it's going to be ready. I don't know, who knows how many people have squeezed that apricot or whatever by the time you get to it. It's pretty gross what you think about it.

Nesim

Yeah, and that's their main gripe with it. Plus, if you squeeze a little too hard, you can bruise the fruit and then they won't be able to sell it. It's also something to consider for maybe people that shop more in supermarket and stuff because that's what's available where you live. Produce in Italy is so delicious because it's very, very natural and therefore can go off very quickly. I'll never forget the first time my wife and I moved back here after living in the US, we did a week's worth of shopping, and by day four, everything that we hadn't consumed was either wilting or rotting. And it's like, right, fruit and veg go bad. Whereas a lot of fruit and veg that you get in, say, more industrialized food chains have been grown and bred to last longer and to look better. That's also where they're telling them when it's for, it plays into it. If you buy something, it's It's not necessarily going to be edible in four or five days. So it's something else to keep in mind.

Katy

I think it's also interesting because the no-touch rule is also in place in the supermarket, right? I've noticed that. I've noticed some people getting there, No, no, no, no. A finger wag?

Nesim

Absolutely. In that case, in supermarkets, by now, near the little baggies that you're going to put the fruit and veg in to weigh it, there's normally going to be disposable gloves as well. Obviously, if you see those, the cue is that you should wear them exactly for the reason we were talking about, so you don't have dozens of people touching the same fruit that then you are going to eat.

Katy

That's so sensible, really.

Nesim

Yeah, it makes sense. That covers the market side of things. Obviously, if you're going to a fishmonger or a butcher, they will be doing everything for you, so you don't have to worry about touching stuff. But remember to address them politely, smile, be nice, all of that fun stuff. If there's something that you're not familiar with and you want to try something new or you want to cook something that you haven't cooked before, know that the individual vendor will be more than happy to give you recipes. And this goes for butchers, fishmongers, fruit and veg people. Say, Excuse me, how would you prepare this? Come si prepara? And they'll be more than happy to give you recipes for that as well. Actually, if you ask them, they'll probably like you even more because you are asking for their help. And if there's one way to get an Italian on your team, not to get them to help you out, is to have them feel that they're really helping you out as opposed to just doing their job. So that's a little tip that goes above and beyond anything that's food-related.

Nesim

Another very common place that you would end up buying food in is what we call an Alimentari, which is essentially your local deli where you would go to buy bread, cold cuts, cookies, pasta, milk, that stuff.

Nesim

These are often tied in with bakeries which are called Panifici, from the Italian pane for bread, or Forno, which simply means oven. My favorite Alimentari in the neighborhood is also a Panificio. It's the same market etiquette, let's say. Same general sampling rules go for meats and cheeses that they may be selling. Obviously, don't push it. Don't sit there and have a full smorgasbord of samples. The sampling, I cannot repeat this enough, is only if you're going to buy something. If you sit there and sample a bunch of stuff and say thank you and walk away, that's not nice. So please only ask for samples if you're serious about buying something. Obviously, you can ask for a sample of things that are sold individually, like small cheeses or like little salamis. If they have to cut it open for you to sample it, chances are you can't. But if it's a big wheel of cheese, they can cut a little piece off. If it's like a prosciutto or

something that goes on the slice, or they can cut a little slice for you so you can see which one you'd prefer because there's various types of salami, prosciutto, et cetera.

Nesim

You can specify when you're ordering certain things. For example, for cold cuts, you can specify the thickness or thinness of the cold cut itself. I find that very thinly, slice cold cuts are a lot more delicate and release their flavor better and have a better mouthfeel. So *fino*, F-I-N-O, in Italian, means thin, let's say. To amplify the fact that I want them really thin, I say it twice. I go *fino, fino, per favore*, and it'll let know to do it as thin as they possibly can. Whereas if you prefer them thicker, *spesso*, S-P-E-S-S-O, means thick.

Nesim

But you can even specify the done-ness of your bread and This is how particular Italians can get when ordering stuff. If you like crispy bread, you can say "*ben cotto*", which means well done or well-cooked. They'll give you the crispier ones that are normally sitting on outside of the baking tray. If you like softer breads, you say, "*poco cotto*", or less done or underdone, and they'll give you the softer ones. So even within something as simple as ordering bread, you can specify what kind you would like. Know that if you're in an *Alimentari* that has both bread and cured meats and cheeses, you can normally get them to make a sandwich for you.

Nesim

Most sandwiches in Italy are very, very, very simple, like most of the cooking that we do. They're based on very few ingredients that are really good and the interplay between those ingredients. So you'd get one, you'd choose your bread, of which you can choose your done-ness, and then you could get one meat and/or one cheese. And that's normally it. There's no lettuce, tomato, dressing, mayonnaise, none of that fun stuff. If they have cooked veg or pickle to preserved vegs like sun-dried tomatoes, pickled artichoke hearts, that stuff, you can ask them to add that into your sandwich, the person serving you may note that you're coming up with a very creative sandwich since it has more than just one or two things. But know that the filling is meant to complement the flavor of the bread, which is why it's going to be mostly bread with just a little bit of filling, as opposed to the American-style sandwich, which is mostly filling with just a bit of bread, which I find equally delicious.

Nesim

These businesses, even though they sell food, will close for lunch, which a lot of visitors are very confused by. Alimentari will normally close around 1:00, 1:30 PM and reopen around 4:00, 4:30 PM. It's called siesta, which literally means nap, but it's actually most businesses will tend to shut down for lunch. Confusingly, some of those will actually be serving food. I have brought up to the various places I go to that shut down for lunch and have explained to them how confusing this is to some visitors. The answer is unanimously, Well, what? We don't get a lunch break? It's one of the things I love about Italy. It's definitely the place where you work to live and not the other way around. You can work too much for your own good, let's say.

Nesim

Another type of food service establishment that you'll find in Italy that you won't necessarily find in other parts of the world is what we call a Tavola calda, which means hot table, which actually in the north I've seen called tavola fredda, which means cold table. It's like the prepared food section of your local deli or supermarket. It's a super basic home-style cooking. The stuff will already be made and served out in trays. You would normally get the stuff to go and heat it at home, but you can... They'll normally have a bit of seating for you to dine in if you want.

Nesim

It's a quick and inexpensive way to have a meal. It's the closest thing you'll get to having home-cooked Italian food without someone physically inviting you into their home. It's unfussy, unfancy. These places work mostly at lunch rather than dinner. Like the Alimentari and Panifici, they also tend to close for lunch.

Katy

I remember when I was there last time, the Tavola Calda, the really special one with the amazing eggplant parmigiano, was closed due to that silly movie. I mean, I dig

Katy

like the movie and the filming, but they did close that place, and I was like, No, I wanted that eggplant parmigiano.

Nesim

Yeah, it's pretty gutting when you try to go to a place. That movie, they actually were shooting scenes in some of the places that we visit on tour because they're historically locations in the neighborhood. So yeah, mixed emotions. It's like, Oh, it's great. You guys are filming, but maybe you could have gone elsewhere to film that part.

Nesim

Now, we have covered the less formal places where you can get food. There is something called Pizza al taglio, or Pizza La Pala, which is more specific to Rome. It's our fast food equivalent of pizza. Each pizza is already made. Each one has a price by weight. You tell them how much of it you want, normally by gesticulating. They cut off that piece, weigh it, and charge you just for that. The food will nearly always be taken to go. I like to do my own little pizza tasting in that establishment. Getting multiple strips of different types of pizza. The person serving you just wants to give you one big piece and send you on your way. So it can take a bit of negotiations. The easiest way to go about that is you tell them what size you want for the first slice.

Nesim

I normally go for a slightly smaller one so I can get multiple types. Once they cut off that size, you say, great, I would like the same size of that one, that one, that one, that one, that one, and that one. Saves you about five minutes of saying less, less, less, less, less. But it's a type of pizza that is specific to Rome. You'll find it in other parts of the country, but it won't be nearly as good. And once again, it's one of these affordable, quick ways to have a meal on the go.

Nesim

Now, if we're talking about sit-down meals, there's actually three main categories of dining establishments in Italy. You have trattoria, osteria, and ristoranti. A trattoria is like your basic entry-level dining establishment, unfussy, unfancy. They normally have paper tablecloths, the menu. It won't necessarily come in a binder. It's rough and ready, and the food reflects that. There is no plating involved. It's just good, hardy stick-to-your-ribs kinda food. For example, in a trattoria, it would be maybe a little strange to act super formal. So in a trattoria, you can be a little more familiar. Once again, it's always a good idea to start out being formal, but you can take visual cues from the setting you're in. The more rough and ready the place, the less formal you're expected to be.

Nesim

A step up from that, or let's say the intermediary dining establishment between a trattoria and a ristorante, which is a restaurant, so a fancier setting, is what we call an osteria. Now, the term is nebulous. It comes from what used to be our local watering holes back in the day. Oste means host. An osteria was the place where you would go hang out with your friends, play cards, drink some cheap local wine, have some bread and cheese. Maybe they would have prepared a couple of dishes for the day. Nowadays, osteria has become the synonym for a slightly fancier trattoria. Maybe you have nicer place settings, maybe you have nicer tableware, slightly more formal service. But it's still to be a fairly informal setting. That being said, the term is quite nebulous. For example, what is considered to be the best Italian restaurant in Italy, it's a three-star Michelin called Osteria Francescana. So don't think that if you're going to Osteria Francescana, it's going to be cheap and informal.

Nesim

The final and fancier setting is a ristorante, as the name implies. It's just a restaurant where you would normally have white tablecloths. The waiters will often be in more formal attire, often unlike the three-piece suit with the best. Know that waiting tables is a career profession in Italy, and you have waiters that will work in the same restaurant their entire life. You do have a lot of these old-school waiters that wear the tie and the more formal attire. The fact that they are career waiters, coupled with the fact that Italians maybe aren't the best tippers in the world, means that the service isn't going to be quite as effusive or attentive as it may be in the US where your waiter is working for tips and therefore is motivated to be super nice and subservient and make sure that you're getting everything at every possible second. If you find that the service can be, let's say a little more abrupt. It's because they don't have the financial incentive to be really nice to you. It doesn't really make a difference to them. That being said, you should tip. There's a misconception that Italians do not tip and that tipping is not required in Italy. Italians do tip. They'll normally leave at least a couple of euros per person. I leave 10%, which in comparison to the US where I spent a lot of time, it's actually about half of what you'd start tipping. But here 10% is considered a very good tip. So know that you don't have to leave more than that, but know that a tip is always appreciated.

Katy

Nesim, I'm going to stop you here because what I've noticed as well, now everyone is paying by card, and you're not often getting the opportunity to tip. And then not everyone's carrying

cash. I think it's a little bit complicated, actually, because you need to remember to carry cash around to do your tip or ask them how to add a tip because they don't do it naturally when they give you the machine.

Nesim

Yeah, that's a very good point. Yeah, it's true. When they print out your credit card receipt, in many countries, there you have the option of adding a tip, putting the new total down, and then they can close out that check. That does not happen in Italy. That is a very good point. Once you're paid, you're paid. It's also true that a lot of places will not let you add the tip on the credit card because that is taxable income. And so they'll say, I'm sorry, you cannot add the tip. So what you can do is you can ask beforehand if you don't have cash, if you can add tip on the credit card, which sometimes they'll let you do. But yeah, that's a very good point. My wife and I will make sure that we do have at least enough money for a tip when we're heading out to eat. Now, of course, if you don't have it on you, that's not a problem. But if you do, like anywhere else, tipping is appreciated. Being a waiter is sometimes not the most fun job in the world, I'm speaking my experience. So especially if you got nice service, if you like the person that was serving you, it is a good idea to show that appreciation in some monetary way.

Nesim

I will say this, know that they're not allowed to add a tip. That's actually not something that you're allowed to do in this country. And like in any highly trafficked area with tourism, sometimes you will be taken advantage of. So know that they have to give you an itemized bill, especially if the total is a lot more than what you were expecting. They have to show you why you're paying what they're asking you to pay. My easiest way of dealing with this situation is by playing dumb. I put on a big smile and I say, I'm sorry, this is confusing. I'm just going to call the cops. And then normally the tone changes very quickly. They're like, Oh, sorry, this was for another table. Or sometimes they'll pretend to get indignant and say, You know what - you don't have to bother paying. But it's an easy, non-confrontational way of dealing with the situation. You go, I'm sorry, this is confusing to me. I'm just going to call the police.

Katy

I'm just going to call the cops.

Nesim

Although, hopefully, we won't have to get to that, but know that that is a resource at your disposal. In any of these settings, when you're ready to order, same thing. It's nice to address the person serving you politely. So Scusi, once again, excuse me. And then I would like to order. So vorrei ordinare, potrei ordinare. You're just being nice. You're saying you're ready to order, but you're doing so in a very polite way. When we eat out, Italians will normally have... There's three savory courses before you hit dessert. So there's the appetizer, which is antipasto. There's the starch course, which is the primo, which means first, which is confusing because this is your second course, but we like to keep you guys on your toes. The primo is going to be your starch course, which here is the intermediary course between your appetizer and your main. The main in Italian is called the secondo, the second course. Know that most mains do not come with sides. You're just ordering the main protein. So if that's the case, then there's also a list of contorni, which are the side dishes that you would then ask to have with your secondo.

Nesim

We don't always do the full three-course shebang. Now, often we'll do just two. So appetizer and primo, appetizer and main, or pasta and main. If you do want to split meals, I will say it's not appreciated if you split one of each. So if your idea is to split an appetizer, a pasta, and a main. Make that two courses. Say that you're going to split the appetizer and then order one pasta and one main, and then you and the person you're eating with can pass ask them back and forth, or maybe you can ask for side plates. But it's something that they'll definitely appreciate because in Italy, most restaurants don't plan on turning tables. It's not like in, say, busier Western cities where, or not necessarily Western, but busier cities where restaurants focus on turning tables to make money. Often, if you book a table, it's considered yours for the sitting. But therefore, they do expect that you're to eat a normal, what Italians consider, a normal amount of food. Italians would never have three courses splitting each course. So if you plan on doing that, that's absolutely fine. Also because I understand that visiting Italy, you may not be able to eat quite as much as we do on a regular basis, but just know that they will very much appreciate you splitting the appetizer, and then one person can order the main, one person can order the pasta, as opposed to asking to split each thing, which they then, if maybe only with their facial expressions, but you may get the sentiment that you're not quite as welcome as you may have initially have felt.

Nesim

If you're sitting at the table a little too long. Also know that you have to ask for the check. It's considered very rude and frankly unacceptable to drop the check without it being asked for. This is something I moved back to Italy close to seven years ago now. I worked for a very long time in hospitality in other parts of the world where it was ingrained into me as a waiter to hover around the table and five minutes after they seem to be done, if they don't want anything else, boom, you drop the check and get them on their way. That is not something that happens in Italy. If it is, it's considered really rude. So remember, you have to ask for the check. If at the end of your meal, you feel like you're being ignored, it's because they're actually treating you like locals. They're expecting you to just want to sit around and chit-chat and finish your wine or water for as long as you like without consuming anything else. It's your right to do so. But therefore, you're expected to consume a certain amount. When it comes to water, know that most Italian restaurants do not serve tap water.

Nesim

They will serve either sparkling or still. In certain parts of the country, they actually have a mid-level of sparkling water called effervescent or slightly sparkling water. But know that tap water isn't really a thing. If they ask you sparkling or still, you have to tell them one of the two. If you say tap, they'll probably just say no.

Katy

In the States, do you get asked that? We get asked here, do you want still, tap or bottle or sparkling? It's quite interesting. You have a veritable smorgasbord of waters now, actually, here in Australia - I don't know what it's like in the US?

Nesim

I've worked for quite a long time in New York, both in kitchens and in front of the house, so in the dining room. In New York, the way they teach you to do it, and it goes with upselling, trying to sell as much as you can to build up the check so you get a bigger tip, and so the restaurant can make more money. But in New York, they say sparkling or still often. And what you have to say, the code word in New York for tap water is ice water. And so they'll say sparkling or still, and you say, ice water is fine. Thank you very much. And the waiter will nod and walk away, often looking a little disappointed. But you do to say that. Otherwise, they'll say, Would you like sparkling still or ice water? Ice water is code for tap. But often they won't say it so that you say sparkling or still, and then you're paying for it instead of it being for

free. That being said, water does cost less here than it does in other places. You're not necessarily, in most places, you're not going to be spending seven dollars for a bottle of Pellegrino. It'll probably be maybe three.

Nesim

With restaurants, I constantly get asked if a guest should make a reservation for a restaurant. And it's very simple. If you want to guarantee that you're going to get to eat there, make a reservation, especially if they're famous or if they're busy, make a reservation. And many places actually allow you to book online nowadays, which is very notable for this country. One of the great things, well, I guess it's a double-edged sword, but especially from Rome down, we're stuck about 40, 50 years behind the rest of the world. And so online presence isn't necessarily a thing. Restaurants won't necessarily have websites, but many nowadays will actually have ways to book online. So that makes it easier. They'll often ask you to put a credit card down. That's to cover for no shows, which is actually a big problem for the restaurant owner, which, and I can't stress this enough, if you make a reservation and you can't make it, please cancel. And this goes for anywhere, even at home. It's not only when you're traveling. You're doing the restaurant a favor. It means that they know that you won't be showing up, and if they have a walk-in, they can sell that table. So please be considerate, and if you can't make it, cancel ahead of time.

Katy

How far in advance should we book?

Nesim

For me, it's always a good idea - as soon as you know what your plan is, try to book. I'll be honest, I will sometimes, when traveling, make two bookings for the same meal. As I get closer to the date, I'll cancel one of the two. But I do that at least two days before. So you give the restaurant a chance to rebook that table. Also because, as you say, food is perishable. And if you make a reservation, the restaurant is factoring that into how much food they're preparing for that service. And so this is especially relevant if you're booking a large party. So if you have, if you booked a table for 10 and only four of you show up and you didn't let the restaurant know, that's not a very nice thing to do. Just remember, try to keep the restaurant up to date with your reservation and the number of people. Also, if you have any young children in your party, specify that, because there's a big difference between eight four adults and four kids. This also goes back to the amount of food that's being prepared and

what food. Kids also take up less space, so maybe they'll be able to see you in a different part of the restaurant.

Nesim

But always specify if you have young children. That does make a very big difference to the restaurant.

Katy

I don't know if it makes a difference with my children because they eat so much. They refuse to eat child meals. I think I always book it them as adults.

Nesim

Yeah, no, for sure. It's something that I must say I sympathize with wholeheartedly. I could eat my weight in food as a child. But I'm referring more to, I don't know, if you have toddlers, or if you have kids in a high chair, or they're going to need a high chair. Those are all things that you should specify when making the reservation.

Nesim

As far as reservations go, some places won't let you book more than a month out in advance. In which case, if you can't make a reservation months ahead, that's normally the case. It's always a good idea to contact the restaurant just to find out. But yeah, in my mind, the sooner you book, the better because you're just guaranteeing yourself the chance to eat there. If you cannot get a booking, there is a cheat that you can try. This won't guarantee you getting in the door. But as I said, most Italian restaurants will book tables for that sitting - for that shift. And so if you show up when the restaurant opens, so say 12, 12:30 for lunch or 7:00, 7:30 PM for dinner, if you say, Look, I'm very sorry, we do not have a table, but we were hoping to have a quick meal, which in Italy is like an hour and a half, hour/hour and a half, they may be able to seat you. And they may apologetically say, Okay, we can seat you, but we're very sorry, we need the table back by 9, as if it's an impossibility to have a meal in two hours. But that is often a way that you can get into even the busier places because they'll stagger reservations, meaning they'll take X number of reservations at seven, seven 7:30, 8:00, so that you don't seat the dining room all at the same time and flood the kitchen with orders. And so since they stagger seating, they'll often be able to see you quickly. So if you can't get a reservation, that's a way that you can maybe try to get a table, although it doesn't guarantee that you will. As far as sittings go, as I said, they normally will just consider your

table to be yours for that service. If they do multiple sittings, they'll normally have one around 7:00 PM and one maybe around 9:00 PM. Although I repeat, in Rome, there's only a handful of places that I know that actually do that. It's important to know the hours of a dining establishment because that can often point out whether it's a tourist trap or not.

Nesim

Most local dining establishments close down between lunch and dinner shifts. So they'll close around 3:00, 3:30, and reopen around 7:00, 7:30. Any restaurant that does service throughout the day is often not catering to locals and may therefore be a tourist trap. So it's not a given that it is, but most local eateries do shut down between lunch and dinner. Obviously, there are exceptions to everything I just said, but these are good rules to go by.

Katy

Oh, my gosh. So many things. You do know when you've made a faux pas, you really do.

Katy

So, Nesim, thank you so much for sharing all these amazing cultural tips. I think it's really fun to learn about this stuff because that's really so much part of travel, isn't it? Comparing and contrasting what you do at home with somewhere else and thinking, Oh, maybe they do it better, and can I maybe borrow some of those ideas and do it at home? I don't know how to go if you walked into your local grocery and said, Can you select my grapes for me? They'd probably just look at you and roll their eyes. But I think it's really fun to do that. I love to go to a market all around the world, and it's so interesting to see not only the different produce, but the different ways that people interact. Thank you so much for making sure that we're well-versed, especially on the market situation, because it can be quite painful to what someone that's being told off in that situation.

Nesim

Definitely, especially with the confusion if you didn't know that it's not something that's acceptable, because it's true by now, we're all used to shopping on our own, especially with automated checkout and all of these things that you see more and more often. So you may not even know that you're doing something wrong, but it could very well anger someone. I did want to add one final thought, let's call it. I find that Italians can sometimes get a little too intense when it comes to food and can sometimes get a little too easily offended, if you're doing something that's non-traditional or you ask for something that breaks tradition. I have

an argument for that, which you can feel free to use it. Well, know that this may anger the person that you're talking to, but prior to the discovery of the Americas, tomatoes didn't exist anywhere else in the world. Tomatoes, potatoes, corn, chillies, and chocolate I believe, all came from the Americas. Prior to the 1500s, Italian food did not contain tomatoes, which is very confusing because it's probably the ingredient that is most associated to our local diet, which means that it's thanks to someone that broke tradition 500 years ago and started using tomatoes, that we have the food that we have nowadays.

Nesim

So when they get a little too intense, I like to remind them of that and say, maybe relax and bring me whatever it is I'm asking for. This often happens when I ask for the wrong thing. So you say you asked for cheese on the wrong pasta, which, oh, there's actually a visual cue for that. When the pasta is served to you, if there's a dusting of cheese on top of the pasta, They're telling you that the cook used a bit of cheese when mixing the pasta and the sauce, and you can add cheese to it, no problem. If you do not see that dusting of cheese, which is often replaced by sprinkling of parsley, what they're telling you is that no cheese was used, and so you should not add cheese. Okay, once again, you're on vacation, you're paying for this food. If you want cheese anyway, feel free to ask for it. But if you get pushback because you don't see the cheese, you now know why.

Katy

Oh, my gosh. But I was going to add that if you're going to be a little bit contentious deliberately on purpose with your tomato story, tomato-tomato, then I think you should deploy your best ever big smile and cheeky grin because that's the way to do it.

Nesim

Absolutely.

Katy

All right. I know that you've had very many happy podcast listening humans join your food tours lately, including me, several times. Can you let everyone know how everyone else can stay in touch with you and join one of your amazing tours?

Nesim

You can find me on Instagram. The handle is Full Belly Tours. You can see tours and availability in real time on my website at fullbellytours.com. You can also just email me directly, if you'd like, at info@fullbellytours.com. It would be a pleasure to get to meet you and show you around my neck of the woods.

Katy

You will definitely go home with a full belly. I can really attest to that.

Nesim

Yeah, I wanted to convey what would happen by the end of the tour.

Katy

It's not false advertising at all. Gracias, Nesim. As always, thank you so much for coming on the podcast. It's absolutely a pleasure to chat and hear all the little nuances about the food culture in beautiful Roma and Italy. Thank you.

Nesim

Thank you again for having me. It's always such a pleasure. Ciao.

Katy

Well, listeners, I don't know that you're going to get any better or more detailed information on the topic of Italian food and restaurant etiquette than you've just heard from Nesim. Having been on the end of a few side-eye glances, I can tell you they take these manners very seriously. Of course, I don't want to over-exaggerate because they do know if you're not from there but I do think it's nice and polite to respect local customs and traditions. Plus, as an added bonus, it's a real escape from everyday life and part of the joy of travel to experience.

To get a refresh of these tips and make sure you've really understood them you can read about them in detail in our episode show notes available on our website at untolditaly.com/211. You'll also find all of Nesim's details and his website should you wish to book a tour - highly recommended and probably one of the best things you will do in Rome.

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.

Next time we're doing something a little different. Inspired by many of you and with a gentle nudge from a recent client I'm going to share the as-yet-untold story of Untold Italy - where it all began, how it grew and where I see it going in the future.

But until then it's ... ciao for now.

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