

Untold Italy Episode 242: Tastes of Tuscany in Fall

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 242.

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 Clarke:

Buongiorno Everyone, how are you all going? Can you believe I don't have a trip to Italy planned at the moment? General life matters are keeping me busy, as well as a few very exciting Italy travel-related projects I can't wait to share with you soon. but I will be there next year for sure. I'm just not sure when yet. Meanwhile, photos of last year's epic 6-week trip keep popping up on my phone and it's fun to reminisce especially as we head into harvest season which is really one of my favorites in Italy.

I love the buzz of the countryside as grapes and olives are picked and the fun celebrations that go with all the hard work. I've said it many times on this podcast 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. Seasonality is so important in Italy and I love how it's celebrated - especially with food.

Joining us again on the podcast is one of our favorite Italian cooks - Giulia Scarpaleggia from Juls Kitchen, in the heart of Tuscany's Chianti region. So far Giulia has enchanted us with the seasonal Tuscan dishes of Spring and winter so of course I wanted her to share the fun and excitement and cooking dreams of the fall and autumn season with you.

Katy Clarke:

Bentornata Giulia. Welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

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

Katy Clarke:

Oh, I'm so happy to have you here with us in Fall or Autumn or whichever way people want to describe it. It's Autunno in Italian, right?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Autunno. Yes.

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Katy Clarke:

Autunno, sorry. My terrible accent. Anyway, it's my favorite season. So I can't wait to recap some of the amazing dishes I've tasted over the years in Tuscany at this time of year. But before we dive into all of that, it's been a while since we chatted on the podcast. So let's remind everyone about your story, where you live, and what you do.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

So my name is Giulia Scarpaleggio, and I'm a food writer and cookbook author from Tuscany? So I was born here in the countryside in between Siena and Florence. I live near Colle val d'Elsa. I teach Tuscan cooking classes. I work with my husband, Tomasso. He's a photographer and podcast producer and video maker, so he does everything technical behind the scenes. He's also a good sous chef now. I have to say he's a good sous chef. We also write cookbooks.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Our book was Cucina Povera, and that was published April 2023. Yes. And now we're working on a new cookbook, which will be out in 2 years. So, it's still early stages, but we are working on a new cookbook. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, wow. That's so exciting. I know it takes so much work to produce a cookbook. I don't think many people appreciate like the testing and the retesting and testing again and making sure, I mean, the photos, Tomasso's photos are beautiful and, Yeah. I'm just sure it's gonna be amazing. Can you let us know the theme, or is it a top secret?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Let's say vegetables. Vegetables will be the main focus, and it will be again about Italy, not just Tuscany. So it's interesting. I mean, it's the food I want to eat now. So I'm very excited and testing and retesting and testing once more the recipes because it's like what I like to eat and what I eat every day, so it's fun.

Katy Clarke:

Amazing. I love vegetables in Italy and anyone who's traveled with me there is I'm always on the menu going, where's the contorni? Where's the vegetable? And I always love trying the cicoria, the chicory and all of the bitter greens. That's really some of my favorite, but some of my other absolute favorite vegetable is eggplant. So that's my absolute, if I could just eat one vegetable, that would be it. But anyway,

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Same for me.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. It's just, I don't know. It has the ability to soak up other flavors and it's very delicious. Oh, anyway, but we're going to talk about Tuscany today and there's definitely something

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about your region that people are so entranced by. And you know, for me, part of it is a rhythm of the seasons that so in tune with the landscape, and you see the changes in the scenery, and I think it's just a very special time in Tuscany. So, Giulia, tell us what's happening around this time of the year that makes it so special.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

So I would say the very first event that tells you that Autumn is coming is the grape harvest. I live in the countryside, so I see also the side effect of this. So if you want to go somewhere in the morning, leave your house 10 minutes before because there will be a truck bringing grapes to the nearby winery. So new kind of traffic in September because they're all picking grapes. We have a neighbor that have an agriturismo, and we were talking 2 days ago about grape harvest. So they are beginning today because they were hoping for a sunny day. So now that's grape harvest. And grape harvest, it used to be also the first job you have after high school.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Oh. So because, usually, the first summer after high school is longer if you go to university because you finish around June and you begin end of September, beginning of October, the 1st year. So it used to be that you search for a job for September, and grape harvest was the most common job here in the countryside. And it was fun because there were lots of young people doing the same job, and it was fun because you were working with older people. They were teaching you how to harvest the grape. And there was a lot of singing, a lot of, you know, bees and wasps everywhere along with the grapes, and tasting the grapes and getting thirsty and drinking more water and eating more grapes. So it was exhausting. The first day, I was crying because I was so tired, but fun.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Now it's more difficult because they use tracks and all the mechanical stuff to pick grapes. 20 years ago, it used to be very common for people to do that job. And so for me, September is grape harvest. That's the, you know, the first thing you think about. And food wise is schiacciata di uva. So it's a kind of, you know, flatbread focaccia. Sweet because you put on the bread grapes. So that's the big the basic focaccia, bread and grapes.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

And that's a seasonal way of adding flavor to bread dough. And the focaccia is the first thing they do to taste the heat of the wood-burning oven, so it used to be like this in the countryside. So something flat, something easy to bake to test if the temperature was high enough for bread, and they would add seasonal ingredients to this bread. September was, of course, grapes. Now when I do my grape focaccia, I like to add sugar, rosemary, sometimes aniseed, sometimes walnuts, olive oil, of course. And so you get this jammy, sticky focaccia. You have to use grapes that have seeds because then they add the crunchy notes. You know, almost like having nuts there.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

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So now you find a grape foccacia in every bakery, in every pastry shop. It goes from being bread with grapes to be like brioche with grapes. So according to where you buy it, it's something more bread or more brioche. But, anyway, all the, you know, the range is just delicious, and it really tells you it's September is harvest grape. So let's have focaccia with grapes.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, wow. That sounds amazing. And I'm so glad they have the grapes with the pips because they're breeding them out, pips out of grapes here. I don't know if they're doing that in Italy, but..

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Yeah, they're doing that here as well.

Katy Clarke:

But see those pips are there for a reason, not just to, I guess, you know, continue the grape harvest because you need to create a new vine, I guess, but also as part of the food, you need the crunch. I didn't think of that.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Exactly. And the kind of grapes we use are either, it's always wine grape. That's something I was forgetting. So it's not what we call uva de tabla - so the grapes you would eat at the end of a meal, but it's wine grapes because they have to be small.

Katy Clarke:

Oh.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Okay? And so it's completely different, the experience. Like, it's red. So red, wine grapes or sometimes uva fragola, which is the strawberry-tasting grape, which is concord grape. So these are the 2 kind of grapes you would use to make your focaccia your schiacciata di uva. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

And could you find that in every bakery in Tuscany at the moment?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Yes. Yes. And I'm thinking, if you go to the market, you find the grapes. So because if you want to bake it at home, you need grapes, you can either, you know, steal them, or either you have a friend that gives you some grapes, or at the market, in this moment, they sell the wine grapes for the focaccia.

Katy Clarke:

Delicious. Delicious. Now before we came on air, you were telling me that at this time of

year, it's a special season that, we might not have in other parts of the world. What season is that?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Unofficial season. It has more to do with the energies, with you know, it's not even Italian. It's it's a way of feeling. Okay? I was reading the other day about this 5th season, and, actually, you recognize it because it's not Fall. It's not Summer. It's something in between Summer and Fall. And it's I would say after Ferragosto, you know, 15th August, my grandmother, she has always told me, after Ferragosto, there's always a thunderstorm and summer is ending, even though, you know, on the planet, there's one more month of Summer. So in between August September, there's this 5th season where you find, food-wise, the best of both seasons.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

So this is peak season for tomatoes and peppers. You have still eggplants, which is, you know, our favorite, ingredient, but there's also squash and, like, pumpkin. And I love to pair eggplants and pumpkin or squash in a dish. So it's really, you know, the best of both seasons. The weather is not as hot as summer, not as cold as the Fall, so something in between. And the energy, the light changes, so it's a lovely time of the year. Yep.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, yeah. I think that's why a lot of people like to visit Italy in September. Everyone's, you know, understood that that's a really beautiful time of year to visit, but I think most people tend to stay in the cities, which is a real shame because, obviously, the harvest is starting to happen. We've already talked about the grapes and what happens there, but it is so magical outside in the countryside. Now, Giulia, I need to know what you're cooking the pumpkin and the eggplant. How are you cooking that? We need to know.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

I just roast them together, for example, like, wedges of pumpkin and wedges of, eggplant, olive oil, salt, some herbs, and then I have them as a side dish, like, both roasted. Or I like to make pizzette, like, tiny pizzas with slices of eggplants and slices of the butternut squash, so when you can have round slices. And then you bake them with some tomato sauce on top, and at the end with some mozzarella and basil and oregano, And they look like tiny pizzette, but the base is not the bread dough, the pizza dough, but it's a slice of eggplant and a slice of butternut squash. It becomes a main course, of course, not a side dish. And it's fun because my daughter, Livia, she is 4. She has lunch at the fazilio, their kindergarten, and in their full menu, there are squash pizzette as well. So she likes it too. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

Well, these children are very lucky. My children went to kindergarten in the UK and they just always came home smelling of custard. I think I would have preferred vegetables. Oh, okay. So when we're going into Fall, these apart from this magical 5th season, which I'm 100% all about, I need to come back in magical 5th season, but, when we go into the Fall proper, what's happening, what sort of ingredients are around and what can you cook with them?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

So we have talk about grape harvest. There's another harvest that is so typical. And, again, it has its rituals and flavors and colors, and that's olive harvest. So when I speak about olive harvest, I think it's a great, sad way to talk about climate change. I remember as a kid picking olives. We have 34 olive trees around our property, so not a big olive grove. We produce olive oil just for the family, so we have to pick our olives. As a kid, I remember picking olives in November, early days of December.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

My grandmother, she told me they used to pick olives in December, January, so it was cold. You had to wear gloves, scarf, hat, a good jacket. The wind was blowing. It was very sharp. Now we pick olives in October with a T-shirt. So that's how I mean, I'm 43. I'm not 100 years old. So in my lifespan, it changes a good month.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

One of the reasons is also we start recognizing that picking olives earlier, so when they are not black but green, produces a higher quality olive oil, which is more, you know, spicy and fresh and green. It has all the polyphenols that, you know, if you pick olives later when they are more ripe but black, olive oil, has a higher production, a lower quality. So, of course, we tend to pick olives earlier. But, also, the climate changed a lot. The weather is completely different now. So that's, impressive. That's impressive.

Katy Clarke:

So do you still pick them for your family, and then do you take them to a community press where you press the oil?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Yeah. It's an olive oil press. The same friends I was mentioning that they are doing the grape harvest now. They open their frantoio - so the olive oil mill, around October. And, usually, by tradition, it's open until 24th December, so just before Christmas, but they don't go to the, olive oil mill now in December like, the last day of December. So you have to book an appointment and say, I will bring x amount of olives or boxes of olives in this day. So you go there.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

You bring your olives. They wash the olives, remove the leaves, and then they press the olives. And that's the perfect example that shows you that the best olive oil is a juice of olives. So there's no chemical extraction. It's a mechanical extraction. They press the olives. When they press the olives, they use the pits to heat the agriturismo. They're like wood pellets.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Okay? Then you have the paste. The paste is pressed and on one side you have olive oil, on

the other side, after the centrifuge, you have water. The base that is left is a fertilizer for the fields. The water just goes away, and the olive oil, which is, like, bright green, goes directly into a bottle, and that's your olive oil. And so we have a celebratory dinner usually after this, which is the Fettunta. So toasted bread, rub with garlic, and then you douse it with your Olio Nuovo, the new olive oil. Sometimes you can add beans. Sometimes you can add boiled cavolo nero, Tuscan kale, because usually, you know, around December, November is when you have also good cavolo nero.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

And that's the dinner you have the first day with your Olio Nuovo, and that's something I love to have. And I love to go to the frantoio to the olive oil mill, when they press the olives to look at the other people. Like, usually, old men, they're all queuing because they want to be sure that they're pressing their olives, not mixed with olives from someone else. Because they're all very jealous. They think their olives are the best. So they want to be there to check if their olives are pressed by themselves or milled with someone else. They're all very jealous. They want to be sure that it's my turn.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

They'll say my turn. It's fun. It's exhausting. So my friend with the olive oil meal, he sleeps, like, 3 hours per night when it's olive oil time. Yeah? Because he's we don't see him for a month when he the peak season for the olive, harvest. But it's, of course, a privilege to have our own olive oil. Not every year is a good year for olives, so we'll see if this year how it's going. Yeah.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

For the moment, there are still olives on the trees, so we might have a small production, but we will have it. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, amazing. I think the color of it when it first comes out is incredible. It's almost fluorescent. Right? It's, like, so bright Green, and you're thinking, wow.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Yes. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

And the taste of it, you've never tasted... I mean, a lot of the olive oil we get, you know, is, mass-produced, and it could be very old even, you know, because you really shouldn't keep olive oil for longer than a year. Right?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

No. Exactly. Exactly. It's not like wine. Mhmm. So olive oil is something you have to use as soon as possible. Usually, it has an 18-month shelf life. Mhmm.

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Giulia Scarpaleggia:

So it's 1 year and a half from the harvest. Usually, harvest in this part of the world is October, December. So from there, you count 1 year and a half, and that's for how long you can consume your oil. It also depends on the way you keep your olive oil. So in a dark cupboard, not next to the stove, in a dark bottle, far from heat and far from light. And that's the, you know, most important things if you want to keep your olive oil good for longer.

Katy Clarke:

And so would you use a freshly pressed oil in cooking, or would you have it more as a dressing?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Of course. It's more for dressing also because our new olive oil is not enough for the whole family for the whole year. So, of course, we keep our olive oil for special for a soup, so for finishing rather than for cooking. But, of course, if you have a large production, you can use your all your olio nuovo also for cooking and for baking. That's something I love to do. So baking with olive oil. And so when October comes, I start making again my apple olive oil cake, which is, again, as the grape focaccia is September. Apple olive oil cake for me is October.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

I really wanna try this apple cake. I love apples, and I know there's a little boy downstairs, while I'm recording, he would absolutely love that. We definitely have to get that recipe out, but we'll have to wait a little while here because it's going into summer here, unfortunately. You can make exactly the same recipe with peaches.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

So a peach olive oil cake. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

Well, I do. I really love stone fruit season. That's, I'm not really a fruit person, but when it comes to stone fruits, I happily eat those. I don't really I don't know.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

I mean, I'm the same. I'm already morning, the, you know, no more peaches, no more apricots, no more plums for another good month. So I'm happy for that. I love plums as well. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

So I have a question. Do you if you so obviously you can't make enough olive oil for the family. So is there do you have someone you trust close by where you get your olive oil from?

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Giulia Scarpaleggia:

We try to find local farms that sell the olive oil from the previous year because it's less expensive, it's still good, and so it's a perfect olive oil for cooking. Because, of course, if you buy the new olive oil from Tuscany and use it for cooking, it is expensive. Otherwise, I buy supermarket olive oil as long as it is, of course, extra virgin and Italian. The thing about Italian until a few years ago, I was very let's say, I wanted Italian olive oil because I thought it was the best. But then I went to Spain, to Madrid 2 years ago for work, and I had to buy olive oil for cooking. And I was so surprised by the quality of that olive oil. So now I changed my mind, and I say, I want Italian because it's local, because it's what I have here. And so for cooking, I always use extra virgin, and it's Italian.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

If I'm able to find local olive oil from the previous year that is less expensive, that's the olive oil I would use for cooking, and then I will have the special olive oil for, you know, finishing a dish, for a soup, for a salad, For pinzimonio, that's something I really love. So raw vegetables, dip in the oil with some salt, and that's a great appetizer. These are the dishes I use with my special olive oil or our own olive oil.

Katy Clarke:

I mean, if you wanna get someone to eat vegetables, I think, you know, dipping is always a great way to go about it, especially with kids. They love to dip.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Exactly.

Katy Clarke:

Alright. So, yeah, olive oil, of course, and the olives and but there are other ingredients that are happening around this time of year too. I'm thinking something something that comes in the ground.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Mushrooms. My grandmother used to love mushroom picking, foraging for mushrooms. She was, like, addicted. I remember when I was a kid, my mom was working during the day, so I was spending the day with my grandmother. And she was like, hurry up. Hurry up. Have lunch. I have to go.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Because when she heard someone saying there were mushrooms in the woods, she was like, I have to go. It was more the searching for mushrooms, you know, foraging for them, than actually eating them that she loved. But I remember she was so excited to go there and search for mushrooms. Now today, she's 96. Today is her birthday. She doesn't go mushroom picking anymore because, of course, she's 96. She's a little slow and everything. But I discovered my father is a great mushroom hunter, he knows where to go.

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Giulia Scarpaleggia:

And growing up here, he knows where to go. He retired 2 years ago, so he never went, you know, mushroom hunting when I was growing up. But now, like, 2 years ago, for the 1st year, he went searching for mushrooms, and it's incredible. He has a great eye. He sees mushrooms. I pass by the same patch. I don't see anything, like, anything at all, and he finds mushrooms. So here, now is the time for porcini or some ovoli.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

So yeah. Yeah. Yeah. A lot is fine.

Katy Clarke:

Sorry. This is a little bit of a tricky question, Giulia. Do you have, like in Australia, we have mushrooms, but we have poisonous ones, safe ones, ones that are delicious to eat. Do you also have poisonous ones there?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Yes. Yes. Yes. We have poison ones. So that's why you always have to go with someone that, you know, knows mushrooms. Yes. And for example, my father, he picks only the mushrooms. He's 100% sure they're good.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

So if he's like, mmm I don't know. I can't really get there. Yeah. Or you can also bring the mushrooms to kind of office - so there are people that recognizes the mushrooms, and then will tell you if you can eat them or not. And then there's a kind of license here so you can pick mushrooms just in your town. So you cannot go mushroom picking/hunting in the nearby town, for example. Because for that, you would need a kind of license.

Katy Clarke:

Excellent. And what would you make with it? What would you make with your porcini?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

I love risotto. Risotto with porcini, one of my favorite things. I love them fried. I I love raw ingredients. Like, I I love tartar. I love crudo di peche, so raw fish, and I love raw mushrooms, so like, carpaccio. Mhmm. So porcini and ovali.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

So ovale, I don't know the name in English, like Caesar mushroom, probably. Ovolo is like egg or like an egg-shaped mushroom. When they are still young and unripe, they look like a white egg, and inside, they're orange. And then when, of course, it opens up, it looks like a proper mushroom. But, otherwise, they're round like an egg. And they're called ovoli because when you slice them, it's like you see the white and orange, almost like, you know, an egg. I love to have a carpaccio with these 2 mushrooms. So just olive oil, salt, a little squeeze of lemon juice.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

And for the herbs, we use Nepetella in Tuscany, which is the Mentuccia romana. It's something in between mint and oregano, so not as mint as toothpaste meat. It's more subtle by by perfect for mushrooms.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, wow. It's simple, but it's always delicious. I mean, I'm salivating you because I love mushrooms. And unfortunately in our family, we've got some people that are allergic to mushrooms. It's really strange. Some are allergic to fresh and some allergic to the dried, which is really, yeah. Anyway, so when I see them on the menu, I always order mushrooms because so delicious. I don't know if you've heard this story in Australia about the mushrooms?

Katy Clarke:

This is just a very quick story. There's a lady who managed to poison half her family on purpose. She's going to trial. Actually, she made a Beef Wellington, and she served it up to people for lunch with some mushrooms she found in the forest, allegedly. Anyway, it's a very famous story, and, everyone's laughing about mushrooms these days, but, I think, it sounds like a very safe mushroom operation there in Tuscany with everyone knowing exactly what they're doing. The flavor, I find the flavor of the porcini is really, really intense compared with, you know, sometimes we get these button mushrooms here, which I like them too, but the porcini is more intense. So, yeah, risotto, carpaccio. What else do we have? We, there's also truffles.

Katy Clarke:

Right?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Yes. Truffles. We are in a good area here. We are near Volterra. I've been there several times. Savini Tartuffi, they are truffle hunters. We've been truffle hunting with them. So, Cristiano, the, let's say, the head of the Savini Tartuffi, he found the biggest white truffles, like, for the Guinness record.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Like, 10 years ago or, I don't know, 15 years ago. It was, like, massive. So this is also a good area for white truffles. You know, everyone thinks about Alba and Piedmont for white truffles, but he was telling me that, you know, maybe 1 century ago when his grandfather started, they were giving truffles to pigs because they didn't value them. And then they started realizing they had a value when people from Piedmont would come here to Tuscany to buy the truffles to sell them back home. And so they had, like, oh, maybe, you know, we can sell them instead of, you know, giving the truffles to the pigs. And so now this is a good area for truffles because it has the 4 seasons of truffles. So you find the summer truffles, like the sassone, the black truffles, and you find the precious white truffles as well.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

Wow. I think those pigs must taste nice though. They've been eating the truffles. Spoiled pigs. But one of the best pizzas I've ever had. And we still talk about this pizza. It was in Tuscany and not far from you actually. And it was just a really plain pizza with olive oil and shaved truffle.

Katy Clarke:

And it was magnificent. I have to say again, very simple, very plain, but the flavor that came out of those truffles was amazing.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

I remember that the most impressive dish I had with truffle with them was a gelato with shaved black truffle. Because they say, you know, it's the heat that enhances the flavor of truffles, but it's also the cold. Gelato La Crema, so custard-based gelato with shaved black truffle was, like, unbelievable.

Katy Clarke:

Wow. Yeah. I mean, I think people are not afraid to experiment with things like that over there. And I think, yeah, if you can make a custard-based gelato with truffles, I'm all for it. Sounds fantastic. But how would you do you cook with truffles often, or do you...

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

No. It's it's something special I might have if I go to a restaurant, but, otherwise, I don't cook with them. Sometimes at the market, you see, like, oh, we found truffles. So I might buy during cooking classes a little one that can have, like, with tagliolini or tagliatelle with the truffles, like, simple, like, butter and cheese and some truffles on top. It is expensive, so you have to scale down a fried egg with shaved truffle. That's my luxury. So, you know, because you need just a little truffle for a fried egg, and that's something I like as well. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

I can imagine a very special breakfast or lunch. You just sit there, breathe in the fresh air, and shave your little bit of truffle. How delicious. That sounds amazing. What else do you like to cook in Full?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Now it's time also for chestnuts. My father-in-law has a house where Tomasso was from in Mugello, so the mountains of Florence, and they're very famous for their Marrone, so the big chestnuts. He said, come in, like, 10 days and the Marrone will be ready. He said yesterday. So end of September, October, time for chestnuts. And so chestnuts on their own, they can be boiled, and so it becomes balotte, and you boil them with fennel seeds. They can be roasted, caldarrosta or bruschate according to where you are, and you just enjoy them like a snack, or

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you can boil or roast them, peel them, and soak them in red wine. And so so those are, like, drunken chestnuts.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

And then after these, it comes the time for the chestnut flower. Usually, it's around end of November, beginning of December because, of course, you pick the chestnuts, and then it takes about 40 days to dry the chestnut in the wood huts with fire that smokes them and dries them, and then you mill them into flour. But then you have the new chestnut flour, which is incredible. And with that, you can make castagnacho, so the chestnut cake, with raisins and pine nuts. You can make nicci, so chestnut crepes that you usually fill with ricotta, or you have them savory with fried egg and pancetta. And you can use chestnut flour to make bread. Of course, it's without gluten, so it's impossible to make bread just with chestnut flour. But a part of wheat flour and a part of chestnut flour, you can make pasta with chestnut flour mixed with regular flour.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

And so you got all these 4 flavors infused in dishes thanks to chestnut flour. And chestnut flour and chestnut in general, they were really a staple ingredient for people in the mountains here in Tuscany because you start in the north with Lunigiana and Garfagnana, then Appennino Pistoiese, Mugello, and then south in Amiata. So all the basically, on the right side of Tuscany, where you have mountains, you have chestnut trees, you have chestnut flower and chestnuts. And they were considered the bread of poor people because in the mountains, they couldn't find wheat. And so regular flour, they couldn't afford it. And so chestnuts were really chestnut tree was also known as l'albero del pane, so bread tree, because there it was, just as they were, the staple food for people in the mountains and why they're so important in the traditional cucina povera on the mountain area of Tuscany and Italy in general. My grandmother, she loves sweet things. And when she was going to elementary school, one of her friends, she had a mill in town.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

And so October, November was a time when they were milling the chestnut flour so that she would stop there in the morning, and they would get, like, a handful of dry chestnuts and stash them in their pockets. And this was a snack during school time because you can just, you know, nibble on the dry chestnuts, and they're hard, but after a while, they release all the sweetness. And so they were really, really important for the economy at the time, and now they are still important for our food culture. One of the strange things is that it used to be the flour for poor people. Now it is extremely expensive to buy good chestnut flour. So, like, a good wheat flour is about €2. A good chestnut flour is about €15 per kilo. But really impressive, the cost, but it's a great ingredient.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

It's a great ingredient, and, really, you taste history. You taste your food traditions when you have the chestnut flour, when you use that for cooking or baking. So I'm really excited for the chestnut time. Yeah.

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Katy Clarke:

Yeah. It's a really beautiful time. I love going around everywhere you go. There was someone roasting the chestnuts and it's a lovely smell. Just even like, even in Rome, they sometimes have them in Piazza Navona, like right near there, and, in Orvieta I remember. But would they get those chestnuts mainly from Tuscany? Is that where they would come from?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

There are also chestnut trees also in the other areas of Italy, of course. In Tuscany, they are very important, but also in the north of Italy, down the south, when there are chestnut trees, when, you know, the mountains are high enough, you can find chestnut trees and so chestnuts.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. And it's very beautiful. I've been in the Garfagnana in September, and they're a beautiful tree also. It's a really nice environment to be in those hills with the chestnut trees and afterwards, you can have something made with the flour. Delicious. Mmmm. Is there any other any other special Fall things? Or, I mean, I know I know you and Flavia, in Puglia could keep going for hours on what's there, but what is there any other favorites?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

But 2 things I had to mention. 1 is squash, of course. So that's, you know, Queen of Fall season. But growing up, I never had squash because it was not traditional, in my mom, let's say, kitchen. While I discovered that my grandmother's, she used to of course, they used to have the winter squash. I saw that growing them in the summer, then eating them through the season. And something that I really was impressed by, they used to do the carve - the morte secca, like the squash, the empty squash with the, scary face for the 1st November. It's a kind of Tuscan Halloween.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

It is. And put a candle inside, to scare people, and she would leave her squash carved squash on the well, which is just in front of our house. So they used to do that on the 1st day of November, because then the 2nd day of November is All Souls Day. So it's something connected to the very special moment of the year. And so one of the things my grandmother used to do is a squash frittata. So thin slices of squash, fried, and then you put, you know, the beaten eggs on top and you make the frittata. And that's something I really like to make in the Fall because it's like a whole meal with some bread. And it's quite unusual because, you know, you don't pair you know, mentally pair squash and eggs together, but that really work well together.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

So it's something connected that moment of the year. And another thing that we make on the 1st November, we start to make these in October, is Pan co' Santi. So just like the grape focaccia that is September, October, November before all the Christmas cakes and cookies

come out, you have Pan co' Santi., which is bread enriched with olive oil, pepper, rosemary, raisins, walnuts. So it's very dense. It's not a soft bread. It's very dense. You slice it. You can drink that with some eat that with some sweet wine.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

I like to make this, un-traditional, so I like it toasted in the morning maybe with some jam. So sweet on sweet, but it's very, very nice. I like to add red wine to my bread as well, which is not that traditional. I once shared the recipe, and they were like, people, ah, it's not traditional. I don't have to use wine in your Pan co' Santi.. But I love to put some red wine there because it makes it even darker and with a deep flavor. So that's something it's one of the thing I like to bake year after year because it's like, okay. Now is the time for Pan co' Santi.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

I bake Pan co' Santi in the season. I'm baking something seasonal. It's like, you know, like entering the new phase of the full season, so I really love to do what is traditional.

Katy Clarke:

That's what I love about Italy. There's definite times when you do things, and it's a rhythm. Yes. So you can't get confused.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Exactly. They tell you when you are, where you are according to what you can find in bakeries. So you smell. Okay. This is the smell of, you know, grapes in September. You can tell where you are, like, even if you're blind because you smell it.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. And there's no point to wait because it's gonna go. So if you wanna try it, you gotta go.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Exactly. Enjoy just as long as it lasts.

Katy Clarke:

Exactly. And it's fresh and it's from the surrounding countryside. So what's not to love? Yeah. I mean, it's a really special way of thinking about things. And I'd I'm sad that we say special to be honest because we don't think that way somehow these days. And so it's really refreshing to go back to Italy, and you do start getting back into the rhythm of what's happening around you and as part of the seasons in nature. And so I really love that. Now, Giulia, I know our listeners will want to know more about you and Jul's Kitchen.

Katy Clarke:

How can they follow you and learn your delicious recipes and stay in touch with everything you're doing?

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

So I would say join our newsletter, Letters from Tuscany. It's on Substack, and this is where now I share most of my recipes and stories. Otherwise, we have the blog, julskitchen.com, where there's an archive of 15 years of recipes. They're all free and available for everyone. And, otherwise, our Instagram, @julskitchen, just to, you know, to see what's going on in the behind the scenes.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, thank you so much, Giulia. We just love your honest approach to cooking and your commitment to preserving the local traditions. And, of course, the guests on our Tuscany tours are lucky enough to experience cooking with Giulia for themselves, but you can also learn so much as she said, by following her on social media, subscribing to her sub stack and also picking up a copy of Cucina Povera.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Yeah. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

And I can't wait to hear more about these vegetables. Sounds amazing. So Giulia Grazie! Thank you for joining us on Untold Italy.

Giulia Scarpaleggia:

Thank you. It's a, it's really fun every time. Thank you so much.

Katy Clarke:

I just love chatting to Giulia and cannot wait to get my hands on that new cookbook. No doubt it will follow the seasons as we've been doing on our podcasts together. If you missed those episodes we'll put a link to the Spring and Winter recordings into the show notes along with all the dishes she mentioned at untolditaly.com/242.

There you'll also find details of our seasonal tours of Tuscany where we spend a day with Giulia, visiting the market, exploring her beautiful garden and cooking some delicious dishes together. It's definitely one of the trip highlights for our guests.

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 visit a beautiful hilltop town in Umbria that is one of my favorite places in Italy but until then it's "ciao for now".

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