

Untold Italy Episode 258: Strategies for Traveling with Dietary Needs in Italy

Traveling in Italy seems to involve a big focus on food doesn't it? - especially pasta and pizza! But what if you have allergies or are following a diet or protocol that you think may mean you're going to miss out on a lot of this experience? Let's find out how we can manage our dietary requirements and preferences in episode 258 of the Untold Italy podcast.

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! Hello friends. Hope 2025 has started off well and if you're traveling this year you have your plans well under way. I've just returned from Italy - Rome and the Dolomites - and it was, as always, glorious! I will give a detailed update on that trip on next week's episode but today I wanted to address a topic that comes up regularly. And that's how to manage food allergies and requirements while traveling in Italy.

I invited my friend Nesim from Fully Belly Tours in Rome to help with this discussion. Nesim is a former chef and ongoing food lover and what he doesn't know about eating in Italy is frankly not worth knowing. For those of you lucky enough to have joined one of his tours you'll know he has enormous amounts of passion for helping people enjoy their time eating in Italy. And as he hosts many guests on his tours with allergies I thought it would be great to have him share his knowledge on the show on this and another episode coming up that we recorded in late 2024.

In this first episode, we address some general suggestions about interacting with restaurants and also delve into gluten intolerance and seafood and nut allergies. The conversation got quite long though so we'll air the second half dealing with vegetarian/vegan diets and lactose intolerance in a couple of weeks.

Before we begin though, I want to preface this discussion with the disclaimer that we are not doctors or health professionals and you should always seek their advice first if you're unsure about how certain foods will impact your health.

Katy Clarke:

Nesim, welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

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Nesim Bekalti:

Hey, Katy. It's a pleasure to be back. Hello, everyone.

Katy Clarke:

Hey, Ciao. How are you doing, Nesim? What's been happening?

Nesim Bekalti:

I'm doing great. Thank you very much. We are, happily at the end of the season. It's been a really fun, really busy year. And, yeah, happy to get to a slower time of the year where I can start thinking about possibly what new tours to offer next year, all of that kind of fun stuff. So, yeah, it's it's been really, really good.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, fantastic. Now some people may not have heard of you, and I don't know who these people are. Are they they are gonna know about you now? So can you give them a quick, overview of what you do and how you got there?

Nesim Bekalti:

I run a food tour company in Rome called Fullbelly Tours. We offer kind of slightly more niche food tours, avoiding the kind of crazier parts of town with the aim of offering, you know, a true Roman experience, what it's like to spend the night out in a less crazy part of the town, you know, eating the way we locals eat and offering, you know, the absolute best of what you can find here. And my background, I grew up here in Rome. Even though I'm not Italian, my father's from Tunisia, and my mom's French. I was born in DC and raised here in Rome. Both my parents were conference interpreters, so I was lucky to learn a bunch of languages growing up, and I've always worked in hospitality and fell into doing food tours because I actually couldn't work in kitchens anymore because, most of my background has been working in kitchens, which happily has given me the knowledge base to talk a lot about food.

Katy Clarke:

Yes. And for those of you who are interested, you will leave one of Nesim's tours with a full belly for sure.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah. I wanted to convey what would happen, by the end of the tour. If you're interested in finding out a little more about Full Belly Tours, you can check out the website at fullbellytours.com, or you can reach out to me by email at info@fullbellytours.com.

Katy Clarke:

Excellent. Now as a food tour operator, I'm sure you get many requests to make adjustments to your tours for various dietary requirements. Is that right?

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Nesim Bekalti:

Yes. Absolutely. And, I'm happy to accommodate the vast majority of requests. Unfortunately, the only one one of the only ones that I could accommodate at the moment is gluten-free simply because of the nature of a lot of the food in this country. It tends to be quite glutenous, but there are workarounds for most dietary restrictions when you're in this country. And so I figured it would be a good topic to cover.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Because we also run multi-day tours obviously with Untold Italy and we have these requests as well. So I did think it would be great to chat about how people who do need to adjust their diet for whatever reason, because there's a lot of reasons, the health reasons or allergy reasons and which is also a health reason. I mean, everyone wants to make the most of their time in Italy, especially when it comes to food because it's got such a great reputation for amazing food. So we don't want people to be disappointed, and I know you've got some great tips to share with everyone. So let's kick it off, shall we?

Nesim Bekalti:

Absolutely.

Katy Clarke:

So what are some of the dietary restrictions and how we can manage them? How will we start this off?

Nesim Bekalti:

We're going to cover, like, the main dietary restrictions, gluten-free, nut allergies, seafood allergies. Know that in general, even though Italy is such a popular food destination in particular, its cultural approach to food and dining doesn't always accommodate special diets. Most parts of this country, I half jokingly say we're kind of stuck about 40, 50 years behind the rest of the world, which is wonderful for many things, but this also means that people view dietary restrictions, allergies, dietary preferences the same way that most countries did 40, 50 years ago. So they don't necessarily cater to them, and they don't necessarily understand a lot of them. I feel that in general, this country doesn't cater particularly well or willingly to special dietary needs. They'll do so if they have to. But, therefore, if you see places that advertise, you know, gluten-free, lactose-free, especially if it's like big lettering, on a large menu outside of the restaurant, that's probably not a good sign. That being said, there are a lot of younger chefs and, newer restaurant owners that are more accommodating and are making, more and more plant-based dishes and often keep dietary restrictions in mind and are more accommodating of them.

Nesim Bekalti:

But let's say that more of the old-school establishments don't necessarily understand them or don't necessarily cater to them in part because this can also be a cultural thing. Many of the older generations in this country have lived through wars where they couldn't afford things like meat. And so it became, you know, one of these things that you kind of dream about. It's

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like these, things that you not fetishize, but, you know, things that you really look forward to having and they're like these luxuries that you can afford to. So to give up things like animal protein willingly to a lot of Italians, they just don't understand at the outset. But as I said, this is a country that has an incredible variety of food, and there's easier ways to navigate most dietary restrictions while being able to make the most of your time here.

Katy Clarke:

I was gonna say that I think understanding the menus and particularly the regional menus and the dishes is probably gonna be key to success in this situation.

Nesim Bekalti:

Italian food is, super regional, much more so than most other countries because up until about a 150 years ago, Italy was a bunch of independent city-states that were often at war with each other and didn't necessarily trade, especially food goods, which is why every 10, 15 kilometers or miles, you have new cheeses, pasta shapes, wines, cured meats. So it's very true that if you have, specific things, foods that you're trying to avoid, if you look at the regionality of the cuisines, picking regions that have things that cater more to your diet will make more sense. For example, say you're lactose intolerant or have problems with dairy in general, going to, you know, very northern mountainous regions maybe isn't the best thing for you diet-wise because there's going to be lots of butter and cheese and cream, because they need this kind of heartier fare because traditionally, they were trudging around the mountains in the snow and they needed, you know, richer, fattier foods. So going to more southern regions that have a far wider variety of vegetables, that have cheeses that are based on, you know, sheep or goat that already have less lactose in them, are easier to digest, you'll probably find a lot more options, you know, that'll fit the dietary things that you're looking for. Technically, Italian law does require restaurants to list allergens on the menus, either on the menu itself or through a separate kind of booklet. However, like many things in this country, this is actually rarely enforced. And so, you don't necessarily find it as frequently as you will. But I think that one of the most important things is to communicate any dietary, restriction or any, allergy earlier in the conversation.

Nesim Bekalti:

Like, begin your interaction by clearly stating that you have, you know, a dietary preference. And you could say *Salve, sono allergico or sono allergica*. And then you would let them know. *Salve* means hello. I think it's always good to, you know, be friendly and polite because you kind of want your server to be on your side. And so by being nice, that already gets you halfway there. If you have severe allergies, definitely specify that. So you would say *Salve, sono severamente allergico or allergica...* And you could continue with *ci sono piatti che devo evitare? Are there dishes I should avoid?* So be precise, but remember to be courteous.

Nesim Bekalti:

Because as I said, having your waiter on your side is like, half the battle. And if you do have serious allergies, would say that double-checking, when the dish arrives is not the worst idea in the world. This may feel repetitive or annoying, but I think it's better to endure a little

awkwardness than to risk a severe allergic reaction. And I find that if you're, like, apologetic about double checking when the food arrives and make light of the situation, you kind of joke about it, It should make the interaction more pleasant in general. Obviously, always carry what meds you may need, antihistamines, Epi pens. They're not that easy to find, especially if you're not in large cities. You often need prescriptions for Epi pen's and stuff. So having whatever you need with you just in case is always a good idea.

Nesim Bekalti:

I find a lot of people don't understand why restaurants cannot cater or will sometimes refuse to cater to special requests. I think one of the things that most people don't realize is that restaurants operate with a highly structured kitchen workflow. I think of restaurants as, motors. So if every single person in the restaurant or for every part of the motor is doing their job properly, it runs smoothly and it's a beautiful thing. If one of those parts gets slowed down or starts messing up, it's a chain reaction, and it messes everything else up. There's a tremendous amount of prep work is done before service starts to provide a specific number of each dish on the menu depending on the service. So whether it's lunch or dinner, depending on the day of the week, and the number of reservations for that day. So requests for off menu items or making significant modifications to food, even if it's something as simple as just a pasta with tomato sauce, can actually disrupt that entire system, slowing down the service for everyone.

Nesim Bekalti:

And so many places just can't afford to accommodate requests because it's going to mess up the entire service. So if they can't accommodate any request you may have, remember that it's never personal. It's just that most kitchens are not set up for flexibility. And understanding this can help avoid frustration or disappointment. I was trying to think of an analogy. What I came up with was imagine going to a movie theater and demanding to see a movie that the theater isn't offering or demanding to see a movie that they're offering, but at a different time. That seems a little unreasonable. Right? And so that's kind of like what it's like to go into a restaurant and ask for something that's not on the menu.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. So I think maybe some people, and particularly from the United States might be used to making those requests and having it met quite easily. So is there a difference between kitchens in the United States and in Italy?

Nesim Bekalti:

Oh, absolutely. And in general, I find the approach to customer service is very different. You know, I half joke about this on tour. I feel that in Italy and many parts of Europe, the customer is rarely right, especially in relation to food. And there's also a different tipping culture. People don't tip as much, and so there's less of, let's say, an incentive to make sure that your every request is met, that request being met with a smile. You know? So there's definitely a different approach to customer service in general.

Nesim Bekalti:

And because of this, restaurants aren't necessarily as accommodating because in part of what I was saying before, they're like, "Look, we have a menu. There are things on the menu that you could order. And if you don't, we're very sorry, but maybe find a place that can cater to whatever" you know, your needs are. I have a very good friend who's a restaurant owner, and, he's unfortunately starting to get bad reviews because they don't offer spritzes or Negronis or, you know, they may not be able to make a, you know, pasta with tomato sauce during service. You know, respect the fact that many restaurants stick to their traditional menus. So if you do a little research and make a list of places that will be able to accommodate your specific dietary needs, it'll make everyone's experience much more enjoyable. I feel it's a little unfair to negatively review places just because they can't accommodate your specific needs, especially if you didn't reach out to them beforehand to make sure that that was the case.

Katy Clarke:

I think it's it's difficult, isn't it? And, you know, where do you go to do the research? And I know you're gonna cover a few things here, especially when you're going somewhere that's, abroad and you don't know. And we try and give a lot of recommendations, we have, and you've been so generous in giving those recommendations over the years. So I think, yeah, definitely listen to some locals and find out where to go and do some research on the actual dishes that are available. It's such a great idea because you don't wanna be hangry in Rome, especially in the center because there can be some waits and stuff when it's very busy, and you wanna make sure that you're getting the experience that you wanna have. And I think there's plenty of opportunity to do that. You just need to be a little bit organized. Right?

Nesim Bekalti:

Yes. No. Absolutely. And, look, I admit my wife and I travel specifically for food. That is the first thing that we look at whenever we're going somewhere. We figure out where we want to eat. We make the necessary reservations, and then we basically plan all of our other activities, our non food activities around that. And I'm not saying that's how everyone should travel, and we don't end up sticking to that itinerary.

Nesim Bekalti:

You know, reservations might change. You know, plans may change. But I find that having an idea and making some reservations so that you know that you'll be able to eat in the places you want to kind of guarantees that you're going to be able to enjoy all of the great food that you were planning on. So in general, I think it's a good idea to do some research, plan ahead and make reservations, whether or not you have, you know, any specific dietary needs, but especially so in, a country that doesn't necessarily accommodate a lot of these dietary needs readily. One of the most obvious examples where you can run into a harder time in Italy in particular is gluten-free dining. As I was saying, simply based off of the nature of a lot of Italian foods, pizza, pasta, breads, baked goods. It's not the easiest thing in the world to find gluten-free foods and gluten-free options. That being said, Italy is one of the leading countries in recognizing celiac disease, and they have better gluten-free products than I've tried in most other parts of the world.

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Nesim Bekalti:

Ironically, I am actually intolerant to gluten, but I find that in many places, they use heirloom varieties of wheat that haven't been genetically modified to withstand any temperature or pest or, you know, that have been, you know, processed for output rather than quality. The products that they make with these flours are often more easily digestible apart from being more delicious. And so, actually, many people that have kind of, gastrointestinal distress consuming glutenous products in more industrialized food chains will often not have, the same effects or the same intensity of effects when eating in European countries. And I've actually had apart from experiencing it myself, I do have I've had dozens of guests on tour that have mentioned the same thing. If you're looking for gluten-free products in this country, ironically, you're going to look for them in pharmacies. There's an increasing number of supermarkets that are providing gluten-free products, but they're mostly found in pharmacies in this country. And, actually, if, you're diagnosed with having celiac disease in Italy, the government gives you last time I checked, it was €140 a month to spend on gluten-free food products. So it is a thing they do.

Nesim Bekalti:

The government tries to accommodate, help out with this. It's just that a lot of restaurants don't necessarily. It's also true that many European countries, especially southern European countries, rarely add manufactured gluten to foods. Gluten is basically produced by when you wet flour, there's 2 molecules called glutenin and gliadin that as you work the dough make gluten. And the longer you work it, the more gluten you develop, and it's what makes those kind of stretchy, elastic, and allows you to make things like pizza, pasta, you know, those sourdough breads with the lovely big bubbles in the middle. A lot of industrialized food chains now make gluten by making dough, and then you wash out all of the flour part of it. And you're just left with gluten that you dry out - powder, and you can add to dishes or to breads and things that you don't need to spend as much time actually working the dough. So you're you can make more food, in a faster amount of time at a cheaper price.

Nesim Bekalti:

But like anything else, the more industrialized the food chain, the less digestible, you know, the harder it's gonna be on your digestive system in general. There are restaurants that specifically cater to gluten-free diets, but they tend to be newer establishments and that are often catering to tourists, not locals. These tourist-focused restaurants tend to lack authenticity. They don't necessarily offer, like, a set of regional dishes. They kind of try to give you the greatest hits that people are familiar with, like lasagna and, you know, carbonara and pizza and which, you know, are regional things that you should actually find in different kinds of dining establishments. And since these places often lack authenticity, their food quality may often be more mediocre in comparison to traditional old-school places. And, since Italian food is based on the quality of the ingredient, if they're not offering the quality necessary, the food will never be as good as it should be. So I'm not saying that they're all tourist traps, but they don't necessarily offer the same quality as the best places that you could find.

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Nesim Bekalti:

And some genuinely great gluten-free restaurants exist and, you know, there's an increasing focus towards providing food for people that do have dietary requirements, but they're rare and often specialized, which is why taking the time to do your research matters. There's actually the largest governing well, it's not a governing body, but there's an association in Italy called AIC, which stands for Associazione Italiana Celiachia, which is the Italian Association for celiacs. They have, like, a whole page where they talk about restaurants that they recommend. And so, you know, they have, some of these pages in English. So it's a good resource, let's say, to use if gluten-free is one of the things that you're looking for. To make sure that restaurants can accommodate you, call ahead. You know? Many traditional restaurants don't advertise gluten-free options, but can accommodate requests, especially if notified in advance. So a quick phone call or, you know, an email, although I recommend calling, a quick phone call can save you, you know, a lot of trouble and make sure that you'll actually be able to eat the things that you're hoping to eat.

Nesim Bekalti:

And one thing to keep in mind, especially if you're celiac and it's like a more serious condition, beware that cross-contamination can be very present if it's a restaurant that doesn't only serve gluten-free food because kitchens may not have separate spaces to prepare those gluten-free options. This is especially true for items like pizza where, like, flour can linger in ovens or prep areas. So so keep that in mind. If you do have something like celiac disease, let the people know that even cross-contamination is something that they need to be aware of.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. We've had a few people like that on what on our tours and we have cooking classes often where we're using flour and making pasta. And so we've managed to make it work, which has been fantastic. I'm so thrilled to be able to do that. But, yeah, it is definitely a concern. We always ask, can you handle the cross-contamination? Because it can really be a problem. Thanks for that. Yes.

Katy Clarke:

There's a lot of gluten-free issues, and I love that resource, the gluten-free association in Italy. It's fantastic. What's next? What other allergies do we need to deal with?

Nesim Bekalti:

So, another very common one is seafood allergies, and Italy is a long peninsula sticking out into the Mediterranean, so many regions have coastlines. And so seafood is, you know, part of many of the regions' foods, like traditional dishes, but especially regions that are known for their coastlines, like Liguria up north or Sicily, Puglia, the Amalfi Coast, are famous for seafood-heavy dishes, which means that cross-contamination is a common concern. It's something that in a very busy service, you know, may get overlooked. You know, the cook may not be thinking fully because they're doing, you know, a million things at a time, and they

may prepare a dish that doesn't physically contain any seafood, but may have been prepared on a shared surface, like a griddle or a deep fat fryer. So those are regular culprits, shared cooking services that are being used for fish and non-fish items. So be sure to specify, especially if it's severe, because this is the kind of thing that unfortunately in the rush of a busy service can sometimes get overlooked. And another thing to keep in mind is Italians use anchovies in even many non seafood-based dishes because fermented fish products give, a tremendous amount of umami to dishes. Umami is like the 5th flavor that was identified by the Japanese.

Nesim Bekalti:

It's like that savory quality in food, and it's the equivalent of, like, Southeast Asian cuisines using fish sauce or many fermented fish products. And so condiments like salsa verde, up north or even olive tapenades often contain anchovies. And so, you know, double checking that, you know, nothing you're ingesting has these kinds of things is, a good idea.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, absolutely. We actually had these happen in our family. My sister-in-law is very, very allergic to seafood and we were having a delicious lunch in the mountains in Tuscany. We did have the olive tapenade and she was pregnant at the time. And, her lips, she had a little tiny bit. She knew exactly what to do. Luckily, she had her AP pin with it, but yeah, I learned very quickly to check for anchovies when we were traveling around with them.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah. And there's other dishes. There's, an equivalent of ancient Italian fish sauce, which was called garum, which now they have an equivalent called Colatura Agialice, the most famous town, is actually on the Amalfi coast. But, yeah, these kinds of ingredients can sometimes end up in your food and aren't necessarily listed, not necessarily one of the driving flavors in the dish. Rather, it's a supporting character to kind of make everything else sing. So, yeah, that's why, as I was saying, starting out with a clear communication and conveying everything you need or everything you need to avoid at the beginning is a good idea. And, especially if it is, you know, a more serious concern, make sure to convey the importance of that.

Katy Clarke:

Yep. Now what about nuts?

Nesim Bekalti:

Another obviously very common allergy that people have and nuts and seeds you can find in many Italian dishes, especially desserts. But, you know, dishes like pesto, which, the traditional recipe is based of pine nuts or even the Sicilian caponata that kind of say ratatouille made with, you know, eggplant and, bell peppers, that's onions, zucchini are often seasoned or have featured almonds and or pine nuts. And so double-checking is always a good idea. And a lot of the sweets, as I was saying, are based on, you know, nuts and seeds. For example, one of my favorite sweet treats that you find here in Rome are called Brutti ma Buoni, which the name is pretty hilarious. They mean ugly but good, and it's basically a little

hazelnut meringue. So the ingredients are super simple, egg white, sugar, vanilla, and ground hazelnuts. And the name kind of refers to the fact that they may look like what our 4 legged friends leave behind on a walk.

Nesim Bekalti:

They don't have the most appetizing look in the world. But, yeah, there are many dishes like that or Torta della Nonna now, which is like a pastry cream tart that has pine nuts either in the dough or on top of it. So especially when it comes to sweets, because especially there, you can have, cross-contamination happen a lot more frequently, something to keep an eye out for. And beware that certain cold cuts can contain nuts. They'll make, like, special salami that, you know, have pistachios or other nuts in them depending on where the salamis are made from. The most common one I can think of is mortadella, which is kind of the ancestor of bologne hailing from the city of Bologna that traditionally does contain pistachios. They do make some without pistachios in great part for people that, you know, need to avoid nuts. But, something to keep an eye out for.

Nesim Bekalti:

You won't necessarily find it listed as part of the obvious ingredients, so make sure that you convey the need to avoid them. And the other thing I can think of that is relevant is cooking oils, especially frying oils. Most Italians do not fry with extra virgin olive oil because it has a very low smoke point. The smoke point is the temperature at which a fat is going to start burning and breaking down. Extra virgin olive oil, the smoke point is actually lower than, you know, the ideal frying temperature. And so most Italian kitchens actually use sunflower or peanut oils or mixed seed oils for frying.

Katy Clarke:

Wow. I'm surprised about that.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah. Peanut oil is actually one of the best fats to cook with at high temperatures because it has some of the highest smoke points. I only remember these in Fahrenheit because I learned these when I was working in the US. But Extra virgin olive oil, the smoke point is about 250 degrees Fahrenheit, which is below kind of ideal frying temperature, tends to be around 350, 375, which is what most, like, mountain seed oils are. Whereas peanut oil, avocado oil, and grapeseed oil all have smoke points of above 500 degrees. And so they're especially good for something like high heat, high heat cooking, like searing steaks and that kind of stuff. But, yes, sunflower oil is actually one of the most common in Italy, much more than many other countries. And so it's, you know, a good idea if you're getting fried foods to confirm what type of oil they're using.

Nesim Bekalti:

That being said, not all allergies will be affected by frying with that kind of oil because some of the allergens will be in the kind of solid part and not the fatty part. And so I have had guests on tour that are allergic to peanuts, but can eat foods that have been deep fried in

peanut oil. So it's important to find out with your doctor if you don't already know what exactly it is that you need to avoid.

Katy Clarke:

So complicated isn't it. Unfortunately, for people, it's, they just want to relax and have a nice vacation. But I mean, like, what we're trying to do here is demystify things a little bit so that you can relax. And if you know the type of dishes that you can order and what to ask, then it becomes a little bit easier to navigate, I guess.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Katy Clarke:

Ok gluten-free travelers and those with seafood and nut allergies, I do hope you found that discussion useful. As always, it's best to be prepared and do some research before you go to relieve any anxiety you may have about traveling and manage those health concerns.

Another tip I wanted to share with you is that you can also buy cards that have key phrases related to your allergy translated into Italian and I'll pop a link to those into the show notes.

Lastly, make sure any tour or activity provider you engage is listening to your needs and understands your challenges. Our small group tour team are wonderful at adjusting menu selections for different requirements and go out of their way to make sure you have a wonderful time enjoying Italian food as I know Nesim does on his tours also

Of course, we've put the transcript of this episode, Nesim's details and much more into the show notes at untolditaly.com/258. If you're interested in how to eat vegetarian or vegan while in Italy or are managing lactose intolerance look out for the continuation of this episode in a few weeks.

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 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 I'm going to give an update on my recent winter wonderland trip including the situation in Rome now the Jubilee is in full swing

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

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