

Untold Italy Episode 295: Favorite Food Focused Italy Travel Memories that Changed the Way I Travel

Some meals and moments fade, but others stay with you forever. In this episode, I'm sharing some of the unforgettable bites and memories I've had in Italy that changed how I see travel, food, and even life itself.

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:

Ciao friends. Buongiorno. Hope your week has been delightful and you're looking forward to a beautiful weekend ahead. Today's episode is going to be a little bit different. It's a bit more introspective, if you will.

Katy Clarke:

You see, when I recorded our last episode about northern Italy with Olivia, there was something that I said that really just popped out of my mouth but it's got me thinking a lot about Italy, travel and life in general. And that was remembering that when I first went to Italy, I had no idea of what to expect. I had read some things, of course, and maybe seen a few photos, but nothing really prepared me for the beauty that was that small town on the shores of Lake Garda with Monte Baldo soaring in the background. I was awestruck and it would have been around 1993, I think, and the world was so much different then. There was no Internet, no smartphones, no social media or even podcasts. Basically, much less information and way fewer visual cues. There I was, wandering around this gorgeous town, finally seeing things that I had only had dreams about, and having food experiences that were a far cry from my student meals in England.

Katy Clarke:

Hello, Iceland, which is a dodgy supermarket chain there - if you know, you know, and you wish you'd forgotten. Anyway, it's a very different time now, and it really got me thinking after I said that quote or little phrase when I was recording that episode earlier. And I just really wanted to explore it a bit more because I think travel memories are so powerful for me in my life, and I know for many of you too. Now, as an aside, I don't know if anyone knows about this brain quirk, but I have this thing that's called aphantasia, which is a condition where I cannot visualize images or pictures in my mind's eye. So in this situation, if I close my

eyes, unlike many people, I cannot conjure up images of places or people or even those that are closest to me. All I see is black. No matter how hard I try.

Katy Clarke:

I've only recently discovered that this is something that other people experience. And I've got to admit, it was a bit of a relief. So after decades of thinking I was meditating wrong when I had to picture myself walking along a beach or something like that, I now know that it's something that I can't do, which is actually fantastic. I've moved on and parked that aspect of meditation. I just wish I'd known about it sooner. Anyway, hopefully this helps someone because it can be really frustrating trying to understand what people are on about when they talk about picturing something in their mind's eyes. Enough of that. Back to Lake Garda and as someone with Aphantasia, I have dreams and memories about places, but it's usually an intellectual thought about what it looks and then smells, feels and tastes like.

Katy Clarke:

I can describe things very well, I think, and photos really help, but I just can't picture them in my head. And so over the years, I've made sure to note down memories and take photos. And luckily, on that first trip that I went to Italy, I kept a kind of journal where I printed out photos and stuck them in. Those are the good old days. Hey, Mum kept that for me. And it's such a fascinating insight into what I was thinking and doing in those early 1990s days, and I dug it out this week for a bit of a giggle and it really got me thinking. It's a pretty serious and highly descriptive journal, but there are lots of mentions of food and wine experiences, including a moment where I've chosen a cappuccino over tasting Barnolino wines after lunch, which I can assure you would not happen these days, and another where I'm simply mind blown by the number of courses on offer over dinner and how long it lasted. Pizza also features prominently, as you would expect from a 19 year old with limited culinary experiences.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, how things have changed. But what's really interesting is how those memories are tied to an emotional connection with Italy. And it really got me thinking about some of my food memories over the years during the times that I have traveled across all the regions of Italy and how much I love them. So, here we go. 10 or so incredible food memories from over 30 years of travel. And what you'll notice is that they are tied to shared experiences and special people. Like the most important memories always are. Now I have to start with some life-changing mozzarella cheese.

Katy Clarke:

Of course, for those of you have been listening for a while, you have heard about this moment I had with my friend Jax in Naples in 2019. We'd been eating away around Italy for a week already, but we had a moment on Spaccanapoli that stopped us dead in our tracks. And we can't stop talking about it to this day. We were on a tour with a great guy called Giancarlo. Ciao. Big shout-out to Giancarlo. He's a fantastic guide in Naples. And he took us to a stall

where they got the mozzarella delivered every morning from the buffalo farms down in Cilento.

Katy Clarke:

We definitely said something like, holy cow. Which was a little bit inappropriate. But anyway, this was because it was the freshest, gooiest mozzarella balls we'd ever tasted. And it's very difficult to go back from there once you've tried the best. Although it is fair to say that Jax and I still try, we're very much bonded over that memory. Fast forward to 2022 and my first trip back to Italy after Covid. So, yes, the whole experience was like, quite emotional to begin with because at that point this podcast was underway and we'd been talking about Italy for so long and it had been, I guess, well over two years since I've been there.

Katy Clarke:

So it was a very, very emotional time. But Olivia, who you hear often on this podcast, and I were in Puglia doing research for our very first Untold Italy tour. And we visited a caseificio, or a dairy, which is actually still on our tour itinerary because it is so good. And at this caseificio, they make cow's milk mozzarella. So remember that. I think there's no way I can top the life-changing buffalo mozzarella from Naples. But this one, this one is on a par with that because we saw the cheese making process from start to finish and helped stir the whey with the cheese makers and watch them make the cheese into little balls. And as we were mesmerized by this whole process, they continued on and they did something that was quite unexpected and they poked the cheese with chopped up pistachios and then they handed us a ball of that cheese.

Katy Clarke:

Now, biting into this mozzarella was not very elegant, I have to say. Juice slopped down over our chins and we laughed so hard. But it was delicious, of course. And looking back, this was a pivotal moment for Untold Italy and also the bookend to a new chapter in what had been a pretty awful couple of years later. In that trip, we also had an outstanding lunch with Nikki, who lives in Puglia with her two little boys at a Masseria close to her home. And that was three Aussie women sharing one of those extended Italian meals, enjoying each other's company and marveling at the taste explosions in our mouths. Honestly, Pugliese food is so delicious. Simple, fresh, tasty, the best.

Katy Clarke:

The setting was beautiful, the company was great, and yet again, I could feel the change in me knowing that the great things were coming our way. Mozzarella is not my favorite cheese at home, to be honest, so I am surprised. I came up with so many times when I was thinking of mozzarella, when I was making this list. And here's another favorite from the Campania region, where we enjoyed the excellent hospitality shown by our friends at Joe Banana Limos. On that day, we were met off the ferry from Capri and whisked into the hills behind Sorrento to a very special lemon grove overlooking the Bay of Naples. Somehow, I had forgotten the first rule of traveling in Italy, which is always arrive hungry. Because on arrival at this lemon grove, we were greeted with a spread of food featuring lemons. And it looked delicious.

Katy Clarke:

I really wasn't hungry at that time, but it is considered quite rude to reject a food offer, especially in southern Italy, so I forced myself to try this little dish that was pasta, and it turned out to be lasagna. And oh my goodness, this dish was made with smoked mozzarella, and it had a sprinkle of grated lemon rind on top. And it's honestly one of the best things I've ever eaten. Combined with that magical view of the Tyrrhenian Sea and our delightful host, who explained their passion behind their lemon grove and the propagation process that they used to maintain it and all of the little details behind their operation, it just turned out to be a pretty perfect day in Italy. Okay, I think we can leave the cheese there for a moment and turn ourselves to the topic of seafood. I love seafood. I think if I had to choose one thing to eat forever, it would be that.

Katy Clarke:

So this wasn't an easy task to remember all the favorite meals that I had. But the first meal that sprung to mind was on our first trip to Sicily as a family. Our kids would have been around four, I guess, and we'd had a great day out exploring the area, traipsing through beautiful Noto. And we had a recommendation from our agriturismo for this restaurant by the sea in Avola. Now, Avola is not a town that anyone is really thinking about much, but it has got some decent beaches, and if you like nuts, there's an almond museum there.

Katy Clarke:

It was April at this time, so not exactly peak season. And I think it was a Sunday. There weren't many people around and or in the restaurant, and so we thought it might not be great. But then we ordered the seafood platter and wow, it was loaded up with everything from mussels to shrimp and calamari and oysters. It was so ridiculously fresh and cheap, we couldn't believe it. The kids devoured the first one. They're quite adventurous eaters, and so we had to order another. And that was just a wonderful day because it was the same day we're driving back from that dinner that our son cracked his first joke. And we still recount that moment to this day, and we remember all of those details. I can even see that seafood platter and remember how fresh it tasted and just how much fun we had as a family.

Katy Clarke:

And it also takes me back to a beautiful week we spent in Santa Margherita Ligure, where the kids were just two, I think, at that time. This fabulous town, just a short walk from Portofino along a coastal road, is where our twins discovered wiggly worm pasta, otherwise known as trofie al pesto, which is hand rolled spiral pasta with pesto sauce. I think they may have eaten it every day that trip. Getting green sauce all over their faces and clothes. The locals loved it. And what parent doesn't enjoy the attention of every passing nonna telling you how beautiful your children are? On that trip, our kids were offered so many sweets and a lot of chocolate, which would no doubt be their core memory of that trip. But I remember the pasta and a couple of years ago, we were back in another favorite town along that coastline, Sestri Levante, and ordered the trofie again.

Katy Clarke:

And the memories of that earlier trip just came flooding back. That meal in Sestri Levante was also fantastic. I had a seafood pasta dish that was outstanding and it was our last full day in Italy and the perfect way to end our 2022 trip. Just sitting outside on the terrace of a restaurant, enjoying the relaxed coastal vibes and the time that we're spending together in a place that we love.

Katy Clarke:

Another place we love that just happens to make incredible pasta is a secret little spot in Emilia Romagna where they make incredible tortelloni stuffed with prosciutto and Parmigiano Reggiano. And then they drizzle over a few drops of traditional balsamic vinegar of Modena at the table. My son would fly to Italy - all 24 hours of that journey from here - just to have that dish. It is outstanding.

Katy Clarke:

And coupled with the view from the terrace, over the vineyards out towards the nearest medieval town, it's one of our favorite moments that we've managed to recreate a few times now in Italy. Last time there, we'd had another tour of the property and we were so happy to be back there. It's really a special place to us and it was the best of times. If you come on our Emilia tour, we'll take you there, I promise. Now we're traveling south to Rome and I'm remembering a meal with the Untold Italy team as part of a food tour that we took with my friend Nesim, who you may have heard on this podcast. On the tour, Nesim takes you to a lot of places around his neighborhood and it's a lot of fun. The second last stop out of like a lot. I've got to say, you definitely need to go hungry for this one is at Nesim's favorite restaurant.

Katy Clarke:

And on this occasion, surrounded by my wonderful team, we tried this jaw dropping salad of orange, radicchio and hazelnuts, which I am still dreaming about. The Untold Italy team knows how obsessed I am with salads in Italy because sometimes things can be a bit rich, especially when you're eating out a lot. So I'm always going for the salad. And that salad has it all flavor, crunch and color. And maybe, maybe, just maybe, I'd swap the seafood for the salad. I don't know. Anyway, the salad's pretty good. We also had a perfect plate of rigatoni gricia and finished off with wild strawberries and some sort of custard.

Katy Clarke:

It was just divine, actually. Imagine that and being surrounded by wonderful people and lots of laughs. Honestly, my life is pretty amazing. And just while we're on the topic of Nesim, he hasn't been well recently. So for those of you who've been on a tour with him or know of him. Yeah, he's got an update on his Instagram and I'd love for everyone to have a read of it. He's a really great person and I love supporting him and his food tour business because I've done a lot of food tours and his one is actually very special.

Katy Clarke:

Okay, we're now into the last few Italy food highlights and this one comes from our trip in 2023. And I know I've just said my life is amazing and it is, but one thing I do find difficult is being away from my children when I go to Italy for work. In this job, I can be quite flexible and manage my hours around their schedules, but sometimes I need to go and be with the team. So on this occasion, I've been away for about 10 days working before my husband brought everyone over. And my parents just happened to be in Italy too, so we met up at Rome airport and jumped in a car to make our way to Florence. These first meals in Italy are often our favorite of the trip. It's probably because we're remembering trips past and what's going to come forward.

Katy Clarke:

And I guess this was no exception. I had planned a stop at a winery that we know and love, but we were running behind schedule and I managed to find this roadhouse where they cook meat in a wood fired oven. And there's a lot of people in our family that like meat. So we had some ribs and steak and another delicious salad, plus a few glasses of Chianti before my husband, who doesn't drink, drove us on our merry way. It was so lovely having everyone around the table in Italy enjoying a meal that I almost forgot that I'd been away from them for a while. That place was in Tuscany where they are well known for their excellent meat cooking skills, but where you can also find truffles. Another star of my most memorable meals. The first time that I can recall was another special moment and it was a hangry dash to a little pizzeria in Bagni di Lucca in northern Tuscany with my brother and his kids.

Katy Clarke:

We'd all gathered there with my parents to have a little holiday at a lovely villa. And I think it had got pretty late and the kids were getting a bit ratty, so we needed to get some pizza. And I don't know, you know, when you've got little kids, sometimes you're not looking too hard at the menu, but somehow this menu item popped out that we just had to try. And the Pizza Bianca with shaved truffles was definitely that item. We still reminisce about that pizza, even though it was over a decade ago. It was so simple, just a sourdough crust cooked in a wood-fired oven, drizzled with olive oil and covered with shaved truffle and maybe a sprinkle of salt. The simple things are often the best, aren't they? That memory came rushing back earlier this year when I was at a small local eatery in the hills of Umbria with my friends Sarah and Sal, and we enjoyed an omelette with shaved truffle, sitting outside as the sun dipped below the horizon, beckoning the crickets and fireflies to come out to play. That omelette only cost €8 and it was, I reckon, as good, if not better than some of the Michelin star dishes that I've tasted in the past.

Katy Clarke:

This meal came at the end of a busy trip and I was ready to go home to my family. But I felt relaxed and grateful at the same time. Italy will really do that too.

Katy Clarke:

The last memory I want to share is from Sicily and it was my first bite of proper cannolo in the beautiful town of Ortigia. Nothing can ever prepare you for the crunch of the pastry and the smooth, slightly sweet ricotta of a properly made cannolo. It is delicious, and if you're a food lover, you should definitely detour to Sicily to try one. I guess it's no wonder our kids are quite the gourmets when many of their first few moments are like this one. No regrets here, although sometimes I would like to try the oysters and cannolo I ordered for myself.

Katy Clarke:

Our first Sicilian cannolo was a finishing touch to another beautiful day in Sicily and I really wish all of you have a day like that yourselves. Luckily, we have some guests there right now and their photos and their wonder, seeing their reactions to moments like this are just priceless. I love it. So, to sum all this up, I think it's really important to stop and remember core moments and whatever triggers them, whether it's food, places or something else. Our lives are just so busy. Days and nights roll into one and sometimes you're going so fast you can't remember what you did yesterday, let alone last week or last year. My traveling memories and food experiences have evolved a lot since that first trip, starting in Lake Garda. Once I was in awe of visual cues, but I guess now in the days of Instagram and non stop visual stimulation, it's other senses that provide that sense of wonder.

Katy Clarke:

Let's just hope they never figure out a way to deliver sense, taste and touch via computer, because that would be a bit depressing if you ask me. Another thing I noticed while compiling this list is that it's not just the food and what it tasted like, but who I was with and how I felt at the time. Simple food plus great company and often a beautiful setting seems to be the magic formula here. And as I'm talking, I guess if we were to describe a formula for our tours and how we wish you could all travel and experience Italy, then I guess that would be it. Simple and delicious food, great company and a beautiful setting. Perfetto, don't you think? As my friend Maria wrote in her latest book, *Mangia*, which was published last year, "Yes, food nourishes us, but it is so much more than that. Food feeds the soul and memories of it are some of the most powerful". I couldn't agree more, and that's why your Italian food experiences are undoubtedly going to be some of your favourites.

Katy Clarke:

I'd love to hear some of your food and other memories of Italy. Let us know in the comments section for this episode on Spotify or drop us a line on the app or via email to cia@untolditaly.com. I'll put the details where I have them and some photos of these meals and dishes into the show notes on our website at untolditaly.com/295 for episode number 295. That's one good thing about this endless imagery. At least it helps me remember things. But at the end of the day, the real memories lie in all of the senses. Before I go, you know we absolutely love hearing your feedback and reviews. It's what keeps Untold Italy growing and it helps more Italy-loving travelers just like you find us.

Katy Clarke:

If you enjoyed this episode, please think about leaving us a rating or review in your favorite podcast app. And if you'd like to go deep, deeper, our Untold Italy premium app has ad free episodes plus curated travel guides to inspire your next Italian adventure. Next week, we're exploring more of our wonderful Untold Italy, and I can't wait to share it with you, but until then, it's ciao for now.