

Untold Italy Episode 302: How Nonna's New York table inspired delicious food adventures in Italy

What would your Italian travel experience be without food? Our guest today is an author and online Italian food magazine editor who draws inspiration from his American Italian family and ongoing food adventures in Italy. Today we'll hear about some unforgettable meals he's enjoyed in Italy, and the power of food to build community and lifelong memories.

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! Welcome to the Untold Italy podcast. I'm your host, Katy Clarke. Here at Untold Italy, we love sharing our passion for Italy in many different ways. We host intimate small group tours across regional Italy, offer one-to-one trip planning services, and we also built an app full of trusted recommendations. Every week on this podcast, we talk with locals, fellow travelers and experts so you can travel confidently and focus on the experiences that matter to you. Let's get into today's episode.

Now, over the past few episodes and certainly over the life of this podcast, we've heard from many different people about what's motivated them to travel to Italy - usually beyond the initial grand tour and iconic Rome, Florence, Venice experience most of us have on our first visit.

Usually it's a combination of culture, architecture and art, the beautiful landscapes and charming people, but most often, travelers are hooked by Italy's food and wine culture. And of course, if you've been listening along to this podcast or watched shows like Stanley Tucci's *Searching for Italy*, you'll know that there really isn't such a thing as Italian food. But rather, it's at least 20 regions of variations, recipe obsessions and commitment to local produce.

Our guest today has made this his life's work. Hard job for some, hey?! And I say that with the utmost respect.

Andrew Cotto's passion for regional Italian cuisine led him to not only savor but also to write about the rich and diverse food culture from Tuscany to Marche, and how the Italian approach to food and community continually inspires his storytelling. He has penned several novels and is now the editor of *Appetito Magazine* - an online space full of news, stories, and recipes for

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anyone who loves Italian food, wine, spirits, and travel. So andiamo, let's welcome him onto the show.

Katy Clarke:

Benvenuto, Andrew. Welcome onto the Untold Italy podcast.

Andrew Cotto:

Hi, Katy. Thanks for having me.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, it's great to have you here. I'm so looking forward to chatting about your travels in Italy and what keeps drawing you back there. But before we start off, can you introduce yourself to our audience and let them know all about you and your background and how you came to really be traveling so much in Italy and loving your time there?

Andrew Cotto:

Well, I'm a novelist and a journalist, and the editor-in-chief and co-founder of an Italian food magazine called Appetito Italian Food and Drink. This all began for me, you know, sort of on a fateful trip to Italy back in the early aughts, I guess. It was my. And it was my first time on the ground in Italy. I'm Italian American, 100% Italian on both sides, as we say over here. But my family was very much immersed in the Italian American experience, as opposed to the regional Italian experience. My mother's family is Sicilian and my grandparents were immigrants, my father's family from Piemonte. But I grew up very much with my mother's family, and Sicily was a place that they left and didn't want to go back to.

Andrew Cotto:

I guess they sort of led us towards assimilation into an Italian American experience here in the US in the New York City area. I grew up here, immersed in it. The youngest of eight cousins, the baby of the family, very much immersed in food because we had the Italian American food that my grandparents were preparing expertly every Sunday. You know, it was mandatory that we went to their house every single Sunday, the whole family. There was like no soccer game or wedding or something short of a broken bone that would keep you from going there on Sunday. And then my mother was a great cook, too. She sort of kept those traditions of food throughout the week. Yes, the Italian American staples, but she was a little more adventurous, too.

Andrew Cotto:

She loved French cooking and, you know, more American stuff, too. So I grew up with food as part of my life. Not particularly curious about, you know, the country of Italy itself. You know, unawares that there was 20 regions, you know, only one I was really aware of was Sicily. I knew that it existed, but I didn't know much about it. I didn't even know it was getting kicked by the boot until I'd grown up, basically, which is not uncommon for Americans.

Andrew Cotto:

You know, they're - Italian Americans are very distinct from their regional Italian heritage. Right. Culturally, cuisine-wise in particular. One of the things I talk about a lot at *Apetito* magazine is that the foods are totally different. They're different cuisines. There's Italian regional cuisine, and there's Italian American cuisine, and we don't pick a favorite. We do recognize the distinction.

Andrew Cotto:

I discovered the distinction when I finished college. I'd worked, learned how to cook from my mother. I'd worked at a really nice restaurant in college, loved food, even thought about it for a career, until I remembered how miserable it was at the restaurant when, you know, when no one showed up or when too many people showed up. I couldn't handle that stress. Being behind the line when people are begging for their plates, you know, and waitresses and servers are screaming at you. But I love food, and I gave it some thought. But I went into the entertainment industry out of college. My first goal was to be a writer and an educator.

Andrew Cotto:

Both my parents were teachers. My father's a jazz musician. I love creativity. I discovered in college that I knew how to write and tell stories, which was probably more important, and I wanted to do it. I got back to New York City and chickened out. I have all these starving artists, cousins, you know, sleeping on each other's couches, and I just didn't want to do it. I like nice things, you know, I like to eat well. I like to have some money in my pocket when I go out.

Andrew Cotto:

And, you know, so I took this job as a corporate job, but in the music business, it was really fun, and I liked it very much. Right about this time, you know, is when regional Italian food started arriving in New York City. Restaurants. Lidia Bastianich showed in the restaurant *Lydia*. Po from Emilia-Romagna. You know, the Po River Valley inspired that one. There was some Tuscan restaurants, there were some Roman restaurants. There's some Piemonte restaurants. And that's how I started to discover that there was all these different regions of Italy with distinct cuisines.

Andrew Cotto:

And that made me very interested because food was a huge part of my life. Even though I was working in a different industry, you know, I was entertaining all the time. That was what I did. Some people took their clients golfing, some took them to the clubs. I took them to, like, really great restaurants. I think there was more meaning in that than any other experiences you have when you're building relationships. That was in my personal life, too. I was throwing dinner parties.

Andrew Cotto:

You know, I was the guy that people called and said, "Hey, I'm going to be downtown. I need an Italian place. You know, we're in the West Village. Where do I go?" At a certain point, I was

so immersed in regional Italian cuisine. I was watching tons of Food, TV, and learning how to cook regional Italian food. And I went on a holiday. I was married at the time, without children, so I was in my, I guess, my early 30s. And we went to Venice, Florence, in Rome.

Andrew Cotto:

And Venice was amazing. I thought, like, a really interesting, you know, very typical, you know, Italy 101 type trip, right? You do Venice, Florence, Rome. And I thought, you know, Venice was surreal and magical, but, you know, not inspiring to change my life. After a day in Florence, I was like, okay, I'm sorry. I have to move here. I've been writing books on the side, too. I've been trying to complete my first novel. And I decided - sitting on this on the terrace of a hotel right up the river Arno at a Piazza, a few bridges up from the Ponte Vecchio.

Andrew Cotto:

As the sun was going down and dinner plans were waiting and we were sipping Prosecco, probably too much. I said, I'm moving here. And my wife at the time was like, "Okay, keep drinking". And I'm like "No, I'm not kidding", you know, and like, three years later, we had a baby. We had a baby 18 months later. But three years later, from that time, we took the baby. We both quit our jobs. We moved to the hills south of Florence, where I finished my first novel.

Andrew Cotto:

The domino effect set in Italy has nothing to do with Italy. They're Italian Americans, and there's food in it. That's what we did. It was quite the experience, you know, like, we lived in a renovated barn behind a villa in the middle of an olive grove, and it was just south of Florence. Bagno A Ripoli is the name of the comune. You could be in Florence in 15 minutes, but it felt like you were in the middle of nowhere. It was like a little village, you know, we went every day to get my meat and my fish, or my fish or mostly meat, vegetables, and talk to the locals and come back up the hill to the villa and cook. And we took tons of trips around Tuscany during the week and then further away on the weekends and really immersed in the country itself and got to understand what makes it so distinct and so special.

Andrew Cotto:

And after I got back, you know, those experiences kept informing my writing. You know, my second book is a noir, but the protagonist is a chef. You know, he uses food as a means of communication. And he's Italian, so he's cooking Italian food and adapting it. It takes place in, like, a historic African American community. He starts to create this menu at the restaurant where he works, where he's blending Southern traditions with Italian regional traditions and that, like, helps him assimilate. After that book came out, my agent said to me, you know, we're getting lots of compliments on your food writing. And I said, oh, I never thought of - I didn't know food writing was a thing.

Andrew Cotto:

I didn't know you could be a food writer, you know, And I guess I understood because, you know, one of the truisms about writing is you can only write what you know. You have to

write, you know, things that you have an intimate understanding of. And I guess I'd done the work right from how I grew up and then my experiences in Italy. So I really leaned - with my agent's encouragement. I really leaned into Italian food in the third and fourth books, which are called *Cucina Typica* and *Cucina Romana*. They're known as an Italian adventure series. They're related, same characters.

Andrew Cotto:

It takes place in the very village where I lived and completed the first book. So it's set just outside Florence in a barn behind a villa. Though I fictionalized everything, right? And I created this character who gets there on holiday, and he's depressed, he's having a hard time in the U.S. He lost his job, and he gets there and he's like, wow, this is everything that I want. It's beautiful, serene. The light's amazing, the architecture's amazing, the natural beauty. But most importantly, it's the food, right? The fact that he can eat really, really good food and drink exceptional wines at a very, very reasonable price. You know, the line that sort of articulates his ethos is that, like, in Italy, eating well is not a privilege, it's a right.

Andrew Cotto:

And I sort of based the book on that, then the sequel, and then I've had three other books since then, all using food as a narrative device. And along the way here, I started writing journalism about food, too. I mean, I was like, you know, if you're going to write books about food, you're qualified to write. So I wrote extensively for the *New York Times Men's Journal*, on other things besides food, but it all ended up sort of coming back to food. And then right around the pandemic time, I was writing very extensively for *La Cucina Italiana*. So they had a USA operation, and they folded it during the pandemic. And I took all my stories and my energy for Italian food and tried to find other publications who would print my stories. And I just was having a very hard time.

Andrew Cotto:

So I went back to the managing editor, who had lost his job when they closed *La Cucina Italiana USA* and said, There's a space here that we can fill. You know, there's no one doing just Italian food here in America. Why don't you and I, you know, build this magazine together? And that's how we launched *Apetito* in 2023. And basically, how I spend most of my time these days is trying to spread the gospel of Italian food as being something that's not just delicious, but good for our mental health, our physical health, for our friendships, our family, relationships, you know, building community. We just had a brunch on Sunday, *Apetito* brunch at a new restaurant.

Andrew Cotto:

And we brought all these influencers and food people out and was just like the best time. Everybody was having so much fun, and we were sitting on the table for, like three hours, you know, from noon till three, you know, And I just love, you know, what Italian food is a catalyst for, which is relationship building. You know - joy, there's nothing I'd rather do with my friends than eat. You know, I don't want to go to the theater or the Yankee game, you know, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I've done all those things. And I'm not like. I'm like, you know,

one-dimensional. But my favorite thing to do with other people, friends, family, strangers, right? Is eat.

Andrew Cotto:

If you came to New York, Katy, the first thing I would say is, "Where are we going to eat?"

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, I think that's exactly what we did when we came to New York. And anyway, really, it's true. And I think that's why when I, you know, first spoke to you, which was only last week, I felt there was a very similar connection. Like, we have the same, you know, outlook on life in terms of eating and sharing food and sharing conversation. And that's what Italy does, doesn't it? It really pulls you together. And I was - when you were talking about your heritage, you may have done this on purpose, but it came full circle. And you talked about your family and going to your grandma's house, your nonna's house, and sitting around the table and sharing the meal.

Katy Clarke:

And then, funnily enough, that's what you love most now.

Andrew Cotto:

It's funny, because we actually ended up moving away from the New Jersey area when I was, like, 12. And we buzzed around for, like, you know, nine years. St. Louis, Boston, Chicago. And that was the thing. I missed all my friends. I missed, you know, everything about my childhood, but those Sunday lunches were what I missed the most. To me, it was just like, it was a magic time.

Andrew Cotto:

You know? It was - we were around the table. My grandfather was so proud of himself for, like, having immigrated and made, had three daughters and puts food on the table every Sunday. He spoke not a word of English, but he would sit there at the head of the table and just be beaming with pride. You know, he'd have this. He'd be dressed up, right? He'd have his napkin tucked into his necktie, into his neck. And the kids were running around. We all felt so loved and special.

Andrew Cotto:

Like, I just really adore that experience. And I'm saddened by the fact that my family sort of - we haven't had a fight. Everybody's moved around and gotten married and moved other places, you know, so we don't do that anymore. And I really miss it. So I try to do it more with my personal life and now with the magazine. You're invited!

Katy Clarke:

Oh, I'm there, I'm there. I'm coming.

Andrew Cotto:

I'll send the Apetito jet to get you.

Katy Clarke:

Well, we might have to just meet up in Italy, I think. So, it's so interesting, though, the heritage, Italian heritage. And maybe it's because of the food. It keeps bringing people back. Like I mentioned to you earlier, I'm like first, second-generation Australian, so my heritage is actually British. Well, I don't feel that pull there at all. And I feel maybe it's because the food's not great and it really isn't.

Andrew Cotto:

I honestly believe that Italy has been able to contribute so much to Western civilization because of the food. I mean, I don't think the Roman Empire would have happened in Ethiopia because there wasn't enough access to the quality of foods. I mean, if you're starting the world, it's a blank canvas, right? The planet. You're sitting there looking down from heavens and saying, where am I going to begin this experiment? Where am I going to plant my stake? You look at this is a beautiful peninsula with mountains and volcanoes and seas on both sides and islands and, you know, great temperature. You know, you have winds coming off from the sea. You know, it was hot during the day and cool at night. So this is where I'm going to build my empire.

Andrew Cotto:

And it's - I don't think it's surprising that so much has come from the. The Italian peninsula and the subsequent islands, because, you know, I mean, the Roman engineers used to march with, like, hunks of pecorino in their pockets for nourishment. Right now, they can go further and further and further, you know, than other people. I mean, I just truly believe that that emphasis on food is what defines Italian history. And I think everything else that we associate with Italian history, art, science, accomplishment is because they eat so well. That's my theory. I mean, I don't know.

Katy Clarke:

There's definitely something in that. I just think I need a hunk of pecorino. If I need to be motivated to go for a long hike. Maybe I just need to take a big chunk of pecorino with me.

Andrew Cotto:

It totally works. You know, it's funny. There's, like, this Italian company, like, trying to, like, get the Americans to use Parmigiano as their power bar for athletes. They were at the fancy food show here in New York, and they had this big display and there's like little packets of chunks of Parmigiano. Their idea is to get the American athletes who would eat a power bar - eat a chunk of Parmigiano instead. And I'm like, I think scientifically you might be onto something, you're just not going to get. The American athlete eat a piece of cheese before their workout.

Andrew Cotto:

There's a lot of signs they need to explain to the Americans to get their head around the fact that, like, a chunk and cheese. But it. It's my snack, you know, four o'clock when I'm getting a little hungry.

Katy Clarke:

So good. I. I was talking to one of our team and she said, I'm just going to grab a little snack. And she just had like, a little. I don't know, like a little was like a baby bell, which is disgusting. What? But that size. But it was a Parmigiano snack. I was like, where are they in my life, you know?

Andrew Cotto:

I think that's adorable. I still think you can get American athletes to do it, though.

Katy Clarke:

Definitely - I think my kids would like it in their lunchbox.

Andrew Cotto:

Yeah, it's my favorite dessert.

Katy Clarke:

Me too.

Andrew Cotto:

I'm not a big, like, sugary, sweet guy. I'll have a bite of tiramisu once in a while. But I love cheese for dessert.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. There's so many. 400, I think. 400 plus and counting, initially. Amazing.

Andrew Cotto:

Wow.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, I researched it recently and I was like, yeah, there's over 400 local cheeses that have been documented. So there's probably thousands more.

Andrew Cotto:

Yeah. The fact that they do document that many also testimony to the relevance of food and the remaining as it is because they're so dedicated. I mean, I was joking. If we regulated our nuclear plants like Italy regulates Parmigiano Reggiano, we'd be safe forever. It's crazy. These guys come in with their coats and they're like, you know, or Prosciutto di Parma, and they're sticking these needles into the prosciutto and testing it, like.

Katy Clarke:

You know, I interviewed a guy from the Parmigiano Reggiano consortium a few months ago, and I asked him, “oh, do you ever think robots could take over your job?” I have never seen anyone look so shocked in all his life that I would even dare to ask that question. But he was like, no, no, because it's all about the feeling. And there's also a lot of science behind that feeling, but it's very precise art/science to get the right Parmigiano.

Andrew Cotto:

And funny that in Italy, even though maybe they could. A robot could probably, possibly do. But the Italians would never let it happen. They wouldn't want to cut the corners to save the money, you know, to make it more efficient. They want to stick to a tradition.

Katy Clarke:

I love that about them. You know, if you ever feel like technology is getting a bit much, you just jump on a plane to Italy and just go take yourself out into the side and it's all gone. It just washes away because they don't care.

Andrew Cotto:

Yeah, I was just in - I was there in September and October, both for wine harvests. Once in Piemonte and then down through some regions through the central. And watching the harvest there was just so magical. It's been a while since I've been there for harvest and be on a fattoria or a vineyard, and it was just amazing. You know, these trucks loaded with grapes in the back, you know, and then they bring it to the farmhouse and opening up the shed and dumping the grapes into the machine, and then it's just like - it's just so much fun and, like, pure and, like, just antiquated.

Andrew Cotto:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

So take me back to your first trip when you did the, you know, the classic, the Venice to Rome and all of those. Did you have those iconic food experiences on that trip, or was that something that came later?

Andrew Cotto:

Well, you know, Venice is always not so renowned for its food, though I was. I knew that I wanted, like, you know, Frito misto. I love frito misto - off the street. The food in Florence. I did a lot of research into Florence and we had some great reservations, and it was just sort of like getting into, like, some of their. Their cucina tipica. So, yes, I remember being marveled by it, you know, and then Rome, we had porchetta and the classic pastas...

Andrew Cotto:

And yeah, I mean, I was knowledgeable enough at the time to. To know what to look for when I was there. There was lots of coverage, you know, at that time, you know, the food and wine

magazines, the big publications, wrote a lot about Italy. They weren't doing so anymore when I was trying to. This is why I launched Appetito. But back then, you know, it was a big part of their coverage, right? So I could find stories about, you know, Dario Cecchini in Panzano in Chianti country, or Fabio Picchi at Cibreo in Florence. So we went to Cibreo when we were there.

Andrew Cotto:

So they were being celebrated in a way that was more profound than it is today. So, yeah, I came ready to eat.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

Andrew Cotto:

And was not disappointed. The experiences I had when I came back, you know, when we went to live there, were much different because it wasn't the famous restaurants, it was way more off the beaten path.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. I think that's something that's quite interesting because I know I do love a Michelin star every now and again, but there's something like, increasingly, as I get older, like, I just think I just want something simple. Like, I just want to taste the flavors, just very simple. And it doesn't have to be fancy. And Italy just does that so well.

Andrew Cotto:

I think it's very hard to get a bad meal there. I mean, you can in Rome, you can in Florence. This has gotten so touristy 20 years ago, though, so I didn't have a bed. I'd go to the cafe, the bar in the town, you know, and the owner would be making something for lunch for the local workers. I go there and eat some pot, like a pasta puttanesca or something. He made it. I was like, this is unbelievable, right? This is so good. You know, it's like, you know, €4.

Andrew Cotto:

You know, I drink half a carafe of wine and eat a plate of pasta. I walk out there for like €8, €10.

Andrew Cotto:

It's - I mean, they do have the home field advantage, as I've acknowledged, but they also don't take it for granted. Right. They are very sincere about, like, you know, ingredients, simple preparations, etc. People say to me, I'm going to Italy, where should I eat? I say, whatever. Like, the first place you find. If there's a line around the corner, don't go there. But it's hard not to find good food.

Andrew Cotto:

And I always have to say, like, you know, I know that Florence and Rome have gotten a little bit overcrowded and that's - you can get a place that's not great, but chances are you're going to, you're going to be successful. And if you get out of the city, forget it. They're all amazing.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, absolutely. So tell us about some of the, like, mind-blowing food experiences, because I think sometimes in Italy, you know, it all kind of rolls into one. And I, like, lately been trying to think, right, well, which were the meals that were really special to me. I did a podcast episode about that before, but I wanted to hear from you because you've obviously, you know, you've done a lot of travel, you've been around, you've. You've done the high end, you've done the low end, everything in between. What were the food experiences that were special to you?

Andrew Cotto:

My first time there, I've been there with my wife and we decided to move there. I went back with my cousin to see the property because I found the property online. You know, I had a little baby girl. I didn't want to, like, just move someplace sight unseen. So my cousin and I went. He's a musician, he's a food lover. Great, great, great guy. He'd never been to Italy.

Andrew Cotto:

So he and I went over there and I'd heard for the first time this guy, Dario Cecchini, who's a butcher in Penzano right now, he's world famous now. But then it was like the first story I ever read about him came out around that time. And it wasn't far from Florence, right down the Chiantigiana highway. So my cousin and I road trip down there, found his little butcher shop, walked in - it was kind of a revelation. You know, this guy was basically a rock star butcher. Right. You know, butchers in America, guys who we never see, if you do, they have aprons that are covered in blood. And, like, they don't.

Andrew Cotto:

There's nothing romantic or charming or, you know, desirable about getting to know them. They're just a guy who cuts meat for a living. But there's this guy in the. In the little shop in this tiny little town. Doors are wide open, right? There's fiascos of Chianti all over the place. With cups, you can just help yourself, right? There's a porchetta laid out.

Andrew Cotto:

There - what he calls sushi di Chianti, which is like tartar. All this other lardo, you know, this is a buffet laid out. Yeah. A buffet of meat and Prodotti di Toscana. Right? Lardo colonata. Right?

Andrew Cotto:

Other things, too. There's like an ironic fennel bulb sitting there, you know? Yeah. And then we walked in, I just... And he was behind the counter talking to everybody at once, it seemed

like, right? And everybody is raising their glasses. Dario, Dario. And he's like, you know, doing his thing.

Andrew Cotto:

And the food was all free. So we went in there and stuffed ourselves and drank too much. And we're like, this is amazing, right? Met Dario, said, I'm from New York. I'm going to be moving here. And he was so friendly. My Italian was bad then. His English was worse.

Andrew Cotto:

But we figured out that I was coming to live there. And we used to go there all the time, you know, when we finally settled, my wife and our daughter. He'd put my daughter on his shoulders, right? He'd feed her lardo colonata on bread. You know, she was eating lardo from Dario Cecchini. I mean, that to me, sort of epitomized, like, the spirit behind Italian food. You know, a guy who's that joyous about serving people food, enjoying food with them. It was really mind-blowing.

Andrew Cotto:

I could do the Tuscan thing all day long. This is before he had restaurants. So then he opened his steak restaurants upstairs and next door. And I had a birthday, a monumental birthday with my family there, which was really special. But during the year we were living there, we used to take trips around a lot on the weekends, especially with Piemonte during truffle season. And I knew of white truffles. I used to get them in New York and on my expense account, because I wouldn't pay it out of my own pocket. You know, in New York is crazy, right?

Andrew Cotto:

It's like truffle season - you're at a restaurant, you know, Piemontese restaurant or somewhere in New York, and you want a little shaving of white truffles. I mean, like, you know, you can see the ching, ching, ching, ching. The money just piling up a couple of hundred dollars for, you know, shavings, you know, maybe 50 for, like, a really quick one. This buries you when the upcharge in New York. So I had them at restaurants on my expense account, but never had my pocket. We were up in Piemonte during the truffle season in the town of Alba, in a little osteria that I read about in a guide, like a wine book that also recommended places to eat while you're there.

Andrew Cotto:

And I had the Tajarin pasta, you know, their egg fresh pasta. And I said, you know, I'm going to go for it with the white truffles, right? I was drinking Barolo by the glass, you know, like, you know, like, which you can never do in New York, right? It was always like getting a bottle of Barolo and it's like \$250 if you want it at a restaurant. So I'm drinking Barolo by the glass for like, you know, \$14 or €15 a glass, which is an amazing price, or a beautiful Barolo. And they had the white truffle and it was. The mountain was huge. It was more truffle than it was pasta. And it was an €8 upcharge. They don't want to make that food enjoyable.

Andrew Cotto:

Only to the wealthy. Again, back to the - it's not a privilege, it's a right to eat well. And even the decadent things. And I used to go to the consortium in the village down the hill from us and where we live south of Florence. I would fill a five bottle giant jug with a cap, you know, of wine at the consortium storefront for €9. So I did five bottles of Chianti Classico, right, for €9. If that was like here in the US, I'd be so much more wealthy.

Katy Clarke:

It is the democratization of food though, isn't it? Because you have - it brings people together, no matter what backgrounds they're from. So you would always have people, you know, even if they're super wealthy or they're from more humble origins, they're all coming together over the table and they're all sharing in that spirit of conviviality. And I think that's a special thing when, you know, people are becoming more segregated and, you know, like, they're doing a lot more online things and ordering things online. But when you come together and you sit around a table, it's when your humanity is there for everyone to see and enjoy. You know, like, it's not a performative activity, it's. It's a communal one.

Andrew Cotto:

Yeah, I mean, I couldn't agree more. And I think of the table as church. I don't mean that in a sacrilegious way by any means. I'm not diminishing the value of church and sitting in pews and listening to preachers and priests and give sermons, etc. But I also think when you're sitting around the table with people sharing the same thing, that's communal, right? It's communal and, you know, and it feels religious to me. It feels like gospel to me. It's just that experience I just described. We had the Apetito brunch last week.

Andrew Cotto:

It was so much fun, right? There was 12 of us, I guess, total, sitting around this Table. And it just felt like magic. And we were all sharing things and, you know, and there's no better place to do that than Italy. And this is why people go to Italy, have their minds blown, because they're sitting somewhere at a table enjoying incredible food. They might just be looking at a valley that is covered in olive groves and vineyards with rolling hills and colors. And the light is surreal. Right. The light is so much more distinct.

Andrew Cotto:

You can see things better. You're smelling the sage bush or the rosemary over there. You know, there's, like, insects buzzing around because they're so like - it's a fairy tale for gastronomy. But also all your senses. Right. I think it's sensory immersion, but, like, it's just. It's the splendor of all that together.

Andrew Cotto:

But I think it's. I think it's particularly meaningful and impactful when you're eating the food, because you're also seeing where that food came from, most likely. That's the hill where the wine came from. That's across that. And then that hollow over there is where they shot that

cinghiale, which we're about to make into a ragu. But, like, it's so immediate and local and simple. It makes everything else seem better.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. And then if you have the opportunity to meet someone that's been responsible for making whatever it is that they, you know, from the abundance that all around them, so, you know, the produce of cheese or wine or a dish like the cinghiale stew, then it's the emotion that comes out of them, because they've been doing this and perfecting these for years. And I think, you know, in our society, sometimes we're all wanting to just do something different all the time. I know I'm really guilty of this myself.

Katy Clarke:

You know, like, I just want to try different things. Different things. And, you know, there's some beauty to be had by just leaning into perfecting one thing or two things and creating it from nature.

Andrew Cotto:

Yeah. I often say, like, you know, so I go on wine tours, I go on food tours, and I know more about food than I do about wine. I should be like a sommelier. I've consumed so much wine just to be like, osmosis. I should know everything about it. But I don't.

Andrew Cotto:

I don't dig into my wants. I don't. I'm not. I'll swirl, right? And I know to appreciate them, I let them breathe, but I'm not breaking them down for every single you know, flavor point or whatever, you know, structural thing, you know, with food even, you know, I have a good palate. It's not a fabulous palate, you know. I couldn't be a food critic, nor would I ever want to be.

Andrew Cotto:

I would have never dreamed about saying something bad about someone's food, because I like everything. You can feed me your shoe and I'd be like, thank you. This is really the best shoe I've ever had. Right. But I like the people behind the food. I'm a storyteller, you know, I'm not a food writer. I became one.

Andrew Cotto:

I was a novelist. Right. I have a master's degree in creative writing. I like telling stories, you know, that involve people. And I particularly became interested in telling stories about people who love to feed other people or grow grapes. Right. I think it's just so interesting that they dedicate their lives to these things. And getting to know them means the experience of their wine or their food, all the more valuable.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, 100%. 100%. Okay. So you did mention you've had some nice - some interesting food experiences in Marche. And this is a region that I think a lot of people are a little bit curious

about because it's very much off the beaten path. Is there something about Marche that really draws you in?

Andrew Cotto:

I think Marche is beautiful, and I discovered it when I was living in Florence. It's very close to Tuscany. Right. And we spent a weekend in an agriturismo there. To me, it feels like California. You have the coast, you have the mountains. I actually have really dear friends.

Andrew Cotto:

I taught for a summer in Rome, and I was brought there by a friend of mine from my graduate program here in New York City, who was like the - I went with the dean of the English Department, then tenured professor, but he moved to Marche with his partner. They live near Escoli Pacheno, in a town called San Benedetto del Trento, right by the water. And I think that eating on the seaside in Marche, I mean, you're looking across into Croatia. You can be Croatian in like an hour, right? So it's the Adriatic. I mean, I love the other coast.

Andrew Cotto:

See the Tyrrhenian going down into the Mediterranean, etc, but the Adriatic is amazing. And like, eating seafood on the sand, basically. They put restaurants up on the sand in Marche. Is one of the best experiences of my life. When you're seeing the boats come in. It's so fresh to me.

Andrew Cotto:

I love the countryside stuff and the wild boar ragus and all that. But like eating, you know, seafood on the Italian seaside. I mean, the opening scene in Cucina Tipica, they go out to Rapallo in Liguria, they've just landed and they're gonna. And they have a meal, like did some like, you know, seafood osteria hidden around the corner. And it's just like, you know, like that to me is like the quintessential. And I first experienced that in Marche and I go back and do it as often as I can. But also in the market, there's this amazing lamb. That's why I was making the California...

Andrew Cotto:

There's mountains, there's sea, they have beautiful lamb. Really underrated wines in Marche, especially the whites, you know, the Pecorino, I know we think of cheese. There's a white wine from Pecorino which is incredible. I mean, they have really great reds too. The Rosso Canero is amazing. Rosso Piceno. I mean, I just think it's so underrated and so under-visited.

Andrew Cotto:

I like Umbria. I think Umbria is a really great, you know, alternative to like that Southern Tuscan thing. Southern, Eastern Tuscan, but like Marche, also has the sea and so it has the mountains and the sea. You could be in Florence in an hour, I think, on the train. There's a train to Florence, train to Bologna, really quick. Rome's a little less easy. There's no, there's no direct train to Rome, but you can take the train to Florence, then go to Rome. It's really reachable.

Andrew Cotto:

And like Ascoli Piceno's a very nice city. Ancona is a really nice, you know, there. It's just I think it is the hidden gem of central Italy. At least I can't start talking about Calabria or maybe one of the regions up north. I think of central Italy within easy access to Florence or Rome or Bologna is definitely Marche is the choice.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. I think people have it in their mind if it's not sort of like on the map that's close to the big three, that, that it's harder to get to, so...

Katy Clarke:

And you have to make a little bit more effort. And there may not be that tourist infrastructure there, but then that's why it's special. Right. Because there isn't that tourist infrastructure there to support you. You have to have a little bit of an adventure.

Andrew Cotto:

I think that, you know, we're finally getting to the point now where people are probably tiring of the crowds of Florence. When I was there in October, I couldn't walk.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

Andrew Cotto:

You know, it wasn't unbearable, you know. But you couldn't pay me to go there in August. Well, August is empty, right? I couldn't pay me to go there in June or July, you know, it's just too crowded.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

Andrew Cotto:

And that. That really is starting to hamper the experience. But I think that's what people say. You know what? I want to go back to Italy, but next time I'm gonna try something different. I've been talking about this for 10 years. Like, you know - Please! There's other places to go besides Venice. Florence, Rome. Definitely start there.

Andrew Cotto:

Or go. Or Naples. Right. Or Mafia coast. Right. Definitely pay those places a visit for sure. Once or twice, whatever. But if you're like an Italo-phile and you want to be there all the time, you gotta explore, you know, and there's so much more to be found outside those places.

Andrew Cotto:

You could be adventurous and try to speak Italian. The people are going to be very accommodating. But you're also going to experience a different experience with. With crowds and lack thereof. In this case, you can sit on a beach in San Benedetto. You have no one near you, and they do beaches so well.

Andrew Cotto:

Every beach has the chairs and the towels and the umbrellas. It's like a club, like a private club. Yeah. And then there's restaurants right there on the sand.

Katy Clarke:

I know you're just sitting there ordering your cappuccino in the morning if you have to get there early with your kids. And then you can move on to your prosecco and the local specialty, which I think is fantastic as well. When you go to these beach clubs and they're rolling out the local specialty, whatever it is, and you just got to try it while you're there. Just like, give me whatever you have.

Andrew Cotto:

I mean, I always get like the seafood misto thing, the crustaceans and the shrimps and the whatever. Whatever they got, you know? Or then. Then a whole roasted fish. It was just so. I think that's where the flavors peak in Italy. It's not the most flavorful things as fish, as opposed to some gamey meat. But I think you're getting the freshest stuff.

Andrew Cotto:

It's right from the sea. They're always making fresh pasta with it. I just love that experience, especially during the day, like lunch, swashing it down with white wine.

Katy Clarke:

That's tough, isn't it? Andrew, you've been all around Italy. Where is somewhere you haven't been yet? Or somewhere that you just really want to go back to and explore some more. Where are you going to next?

Andrew Cotto:

Well, this is sort of embarrassing considering where. This is where my family is from. I've only been to Sicily once, and it was only. It was just for a very short time. And many of my contributors at Appetito take tours there with people. They bring people there for tours, and they all rave about Sicily in ways that it's like, so distinct. It's not even Italy. It's a different place.

Andrew Cotto:

And, you know, I mean, I just feel like Italy is calling me. The wines are familiar or. I was drinking Donnafugata wine last night at an event. There's a panettone maker from Sicily, Fiasconaro had a new shop in Soho here, and they had a party last night and they were

pouring Donnafugata wines and like, so, like the wines from Mount Etna, Sicily seems to be like, you know, really evolving, you know, and becoming a place, you know, so there's that.

Andrew Cotto:

The same with Calabria. I've never been to Calabria. And I hear wonderful things about that. I've never been to Puglia, so Puglia is definitely on my list too. I mean, I think I've been to half the regions, so I just. Obviously, I want to go to every single one.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, I'm on that trip as well. I've only got three to go now, like, but it's become like a little bit of an obsession, doesn't it? Because you really want to. Once you find out about this regional cuisine and the different culture in each place, you just really want to go and see it all and experience it for yourself, because it's so special.

Andrew Cotto:

I mean, I tell you one thing, and this is not a dis of Asia, but I'm never going to go to China or Thailand because there's too many things I still want to do in Italy that I haven't done yet. You know, who knows? Maybe I'll get that done at a certain point when I'm, you know, 75. Maybe I'll take a trip to Japan. But, like, you know, I'm - or even like Spain. Forget Asia, like other countries in Europe. I don't have any interest in ever going back to France again for the rest of my life. I've been there.

Andrew Cotto:

I was there right after the pandemic, you know, in Aix-en-Provence. And I was like, no, all I want is Italy. If I went to Spain, I want to - never going to catch me in Denmark again, because I'm just so immersed and enamored, and there's still so much there to explore. I mean, it's 20 countries.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, that's true. At least. You know, even because I mean, even, like, from town to town, they're all arguing about who's the best.

Andrew Cotto:

Oh, yeah. I mean, Florence and Siena are different places. Right. And they're all in Tuscany, but I mean, the cuisine's different down there. And I was happy to have been in Piemonte recently, which was on my short list to explore further, and I really saw a lot of it. We were in Roero, which is a wine zone very close to Langhe and Monferrato. So they're making Nebbiolo grapes there and Arnie's grapes, this beautiful white called Arneis, which I'd never heard of.

Andrew Cotto:

Even the wine writers weren't familiar with it. And we were all blown away by both the Nebbiolo red and the Arneis white in Roero.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, there's so many. Like, the difference between Piedmont and Puglia, you couldn't get bigger contrasts, in fact. And so it's really hard to, you know, not go back to Italy, you know? But I think he would like Japan, because I actually think there's lies symbiosis between Italy and Japan. I mean, Japan is much more organized and structured, but they do have this commitment to excellent food and also just focusing on that one thing to make it really special. And they've got a really nice relationship happening there, the Italians and the Japanese. So it's a beautiful thing to see.

Katy Clarke:

But, yeah, maybe one day when you've knocked off all the 20 regions, huh?

Andrew Cotto:

Yeah. And that your point's well taken, because Japan and Italy do have a great relationship. There's great symbiosis. There's. I mean, I have friends from Italy who went to Tokyo and said they had the best Italian food of their life there. But they really - well, a - they bring over a lot of Italian chefs.

Andrew Cotto:

They just pay so much, they can't say no. But their emphasis on ingredients and technique are very similar. Right. You know, simple, clean. I mean. Yes. The Italian food and Japanese food, even though they might seem quite different, really get along very well. Yeah, Lots of Japanese, Italian.

Andrew Cotto:

They call it fusion. I don't really like that word, but, like, you know, sort of influenced here in New York.

Katy Clarke:

Okay.

Andrew Cotto:

And it does work. I agree. And I would like to go to Japan.

Katy Clarke:

I think it might be the umami that, you know, that additional flavor that might be the thing that's aligning them. But I know the consortium has a thing where they do Sake and Parmigiano tastings together, which is like super interesting. Yeah. Because I don't think Sake is similar to Lambrusco at all. But anyway, give it a go.

Andrew Cotto:

Wow.

Katy Clarke:

They've tried it and apparently it works. There you go. Oh, Andrew, this has been great. I love talking with people about Italy and food and sharing stories and all of those things. So thank you for joining us on Untold Italy. Can you let everyone know how they can stay in touch with you, maybe read your books and have a look around *Apetito*? Because I've looked around *Apetito* and you know, I'm sorry I hadn't found it sooner. So let's make sure everyone knows where to find you.

Andrew Cotto:

Yeah. So, appetitomagazine.com is where you can find the publication. We have a newsletter you can sign up for. We also have a subscription box. We can't ship it anywhere other than the US, so if you're US-based, we have a great subscription box. You get a beautiful 100% organic, award-winning olive oil.

Andrew Cotto:

You get a copy of my novel *Cucina Typica*. You get some other little goodies in there. So there's those subscription boxes. They're more like gift boxes. You can, you can look at the magazine all day long. But we'd love for you to sign up for our newsletter and follow us on Instagram and Facebook, where we are @appetitomagazine.com.

Andrew Cotto:

My own platform, which is a little bit separate. I do other things, you know - novels and I have just turned one into a play. You can find more things about me and my books at andrewcotto.com and I'm on LinkedIn. I guess I love hearing from people. So if you follow me, I'll follow you back and we could be in touch. And if you're in New York, you want recommendations, you want and take you out to eat.

Katy Clarke:

You heard it here first. I hope you're inundated with invitations. Oh, thank you, Andrew. And let's hope we bump into each other somewhere soon. Maybe Italy, maybe New York, you never know, maybe Japan. Anyway, thanks for joining us on Untold Italy today.

Andrew Cotto:

Thanks for having me.

Katy Clarke:

All I can say is hooray for opera singing butchers and long table lunches that stretch into dinner. Once upon a time, I was a little shocked when some fellow travel bloggers said they traveled solely for food. We were talking about spending time in Florence and they flat-out said they had no interest in visiting any galleries because they would rather just eat.

I have to admit I did get a bit judgy about that, but these days I'm fully on board and in fact it's a driving force behind Untold Italy to encourage everyone to travel and explore what suits

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them best. And let's face it, you could do a lot worse than make an Italy itinerary solely about trying iconic produce and dishes. I would absolutely love it if one of our clients came up with that challenge, but it also could make a pretty good podcast episode, don't you think?

For now, we've got plenty of inspiration on our site. You'll find all the places Andrew mentioned on the show, information about Appetito magazine and details on how you can get in touch with him in our episode show notes at untolditaly.com/302.

Thank you for joining us on this journey, and for supporting Untold Italy. If you enjoyed today's episode, we'd be so grateful if you could leave a rating or review on your favorite podcast app, or consider upgrading to our premium app for ad-free listening and exclusive travel content, including our favorite restaurants and osterie in tiny towns across Italy.

Next week, it's time for a bit of festive Italian fun. But until then, it's "ciao for now."