

# Untold Italy Episode 312: Beyond Pizza and Pasta: Regional Italian Cuisine

Italy has one of the most complex food cultures on earth. And somehow we reduced it to two things - pizza and pasta, ok and maybe gelato. On this episode, you'll learn how diverse and interesting Italian cuisine is and how to find those life-changing dishes when you get to Italy.

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! I hope you are happily planning your Italy trips or at least dreaming away. I've been glued to the Winter Olympics beaming in from Cortina and Milano, and it's wonderful to see the Italians putting on such a spectacular show. Oh, to be back in the Dolomites right now! I'm Katy, the founder of Untold Italy, and today I hope you are not too hungry because you are about to be. Get ready to geek out on Italian food culture because on today's episode, my friend Nesim, a former chef and now food tour operator in Rome, is here to bust a few Italian food myths and to get to the bottom of regional Italian cuisine. Food is a big reason why people want to visit Italy, and from experience, they are either very excited or a little concerned about what they'll find when they get there. And to be honest, whatever camp you're in, your trip could come with a few disappointments if you are not prepared. Not to worry, by the end of this episode, you will know your carbonaras from your caponatas and why pizza might not be the best order in Venice. So let's dive straight in and get some of those myths cleared up and help you identify the really, really good food that suits your eating style and preference when you arrive in Italy.

Katy Clarke:

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

Nesim Bekalti:

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

Katy Clarke:

Oh, it's been a little while, hasn't it, since you've been on the podcast? I feel like it's been 6 months.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, yeah, it's been a while and I've missed it a lot.

Katy Clarke:

We've missed you too. What's going on in Rome at the moment?

Nesim Bekalti:

Gearing up for the nice weather again. This year, the winter has been like very wet and gray and cold. So, looking forward to the nicer weather that we're normally accustomed to. And the Jubilee stuff is happily over. So the city has been beautified quite a bit. And although there's still some works going on, exemplifying our efficiency.

Katy Clarke:

Piano piano.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yes, piano piano is definitely the local approach. And I'm looking forward to getting back out there.

Katy Clarke:

Excellent. Excellent. Okay, so some people may not know who you are, Nesim. And Nesim's done a few episodes with us over the years, but it's always good to get a little introduction before we get started on our chat.

Nesim Bekalti:

So, um, my name is Nesim. I run a food tour company in Rome called Full Belly Tours, where we focus on less-trafficked areas, kind of more niche neighborhoods. I work a lot in the neighborhood where I grew up, in Testaccio, and I basically bring you to all of my favorite places, most of which I've been going to since I was 4 years old, and you get to experience a taste of true Roman life away from the hustle and bustle and chaos of the center and the attractions. I have a restaurant background. I was a cook for most of my life, always worked in the restaurant industry because I absolutely love taking care of people. I'm happy that it's translated into what I do now.

Katy Clarke:

And we're all happy that it has too. So everyone, if you're going to Rome, it is literally the highlight of a lot of people's visit is to go and hang out with Nesim and go taste the food that he loves, in the neighborhood that he grew up in. And it's very special. I've taken my parents, I've taken my family, I've taken my friends, and even sometimes we've bumped into tours along the way, haven't we, Nesim, when I've been out and about in that neighborhood while I've been in Rome? And it's really - it's so much fun. The reason Nesim is on the show today, because we wanted to give everyone a little taster of Italian foods, because it's not just pizza and pasta is it, Nesim? I think people get it all muddled in their head about what Italian food really is. So what we're going to do today is Nesim's going to help us untangle that spaghetti

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of mess of Italian food and help us understand a little bit more about why it's so unique and so different.

Nesim Bekalti:

So Italian food, at its most basic, is the celebration of local seasonal ingredients. It's a cuisine based on simplicity, highlighting the best of what each area actually has to offer. And this is why many of the most famous Italian dishes, to not say all of them, are comprised of just a handful of ingredients. Think the iconic Caprese salad, which is literally just mozzarella, tomatoes, extra virgin olive oil, and basil. Know that we do not put balsamic vinegar on it here. To an Italian, the balsamic vinegar would kill the, like, milky sweetness of the mozzarella itself. Pizza Margherita, which is kind of a caprese on dough, but it's like very few simple ingredients. Spaghetti alle vongole, the famous spaghetti with white clams, the sauce is clams, white wine, garlic, parsley, chili flake, done. And the only reason this works is because the quality of the ingredients is so incredibly high.

Nesim Bekalti:

And this is in part because Italy has hundreds, to not say thousands, of microclimates, which allows an insane variety of flora and fauna to thrive. So you get this incredible larder at your disposal. But also because Italians are fiercely proud of their culinary identity and go out of their way to protect their food, whether through legislation to ban harmful chemicals and mass-produced foods, or through the classification system that they have, where they protect many of their most famous foods through the IGP and DOP system. Cuisine here is, is part of everyone's identity. Like, teenagers know how to cook many things, you know, they're familiar with what produce is in season, you know, and I don't know how common that is in many other countries. On a deeper level, Italian cuisine is this mosaic made up of microclimates, geography, wealth, especially historically, and to a certain extent, politics and conquests. So, whether there were occupiers or who your neighbors were. Which is why Italian food simply can't be categorized as one single cuisine.

Nesim Bekalti:

So, what people think of when they think of Italian food, especially abroad, so - pizza, lasagna, spaghetti and meatballs. It's like the greatest hits of many regional dishes, and some of the things that are known abroad aren't even Italian food by Italian people's standards because they weren't necessarily invented here. But coming here expecting those is - you may be surprised at the fact that you won't be able to find those all.

Katy Clarke:

You could be very disappointed, in fact.

Nesim Bekalti:

Absolutely. So those 4 main forces - the microclimates, geography, wealth, and politics and conquest - are what have shaped this country's cuisine and explain why it's so incredibly diverse. So what people call Italian food is ultimately the result of local survival, climate, and history. So today we'll be talking about how for example, why butter is more prevalent in the

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north as opposed to olive oil being the fat of choice for much of the center and south of the country. And why, depending on where you are, the cuisine can truly feel like completely different worlds. So rather than, you know, giving you dishes to memorize for each region, we'll give you more of like a mental map for understanding Italian food so that when you're traveling here, you can order with confidence, travel with curiosity, and stop wondering why your pizza isn't good everywhere.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, let's go. So what are some of the common misunderstandings about Italian food?

Nesim Bekalti:

The biggest one is this concept of Italian food. There, ultimately is no such thing, especially not in relation to what maybe your, you know, local Italian restaurant abroad is offering. And this actually applies to every country. If you think of where you're from, think of how the food changes depending on where you are in your country. Now, that regionality in food applies to everywhere. Italy is the same, but exponentially so because of the 4 factors that we were talking about. So if you look at it in those terms and you multiply the local variety that you have by 20, to not say more, because there's that many regions, this argument starts making a little more sense. But yeah, that's the biggest one, that Italian food is kind of a misnomer because you're talking about, you know, dozens of regional types of cuisine.

Nesim Bekalti:

Another big one is that just because you're in Italy, unfortunately, doesn't mean that the food is going to be good everywhere. I do meet a lot of people on tour that are surprised that they've had bad meals. Unfortunately, every country has bad restaurants where people either don't know how to cook or aren't putting in the effort for whatever reason. And so especially if you're in like more touristy areas, look out for, you know, tourist traps and stuff because there are unfortunately people who prey on the fact that, you know, you think you're in Italy, everyone cooks well, and so you can kind of sit down and grab a bite wherever. That, unfortunately, isn't the case. So doing some research goes a very long way to make sure that you get the best possible meal, no matter where you end up in the country. Another big one - this is probably the, the funniest one to me - there's this misconception abroad that fresh pasta like homemade with the eggs and, you know, is better than dried pasta and that making it yourself is better than buying it. Depending on where you are in the country, nothing could be further from the truth.

Nesim Bekalti:

So the main region that does egg pasta is Emilia-Romagna, where Bologna is, and there they'll tell you that it's the best pasta in the world, it's better than anything else, and you should always eat that. Or mostly that. In Rome, for example, where I grew up and currently live, we actually eat more dried pasta than fresh. And there's an insane variety of really high-quality dried pasta. Personally, I actually prefer dried pasta to fresh pasta. Now, it is true that you don't necessarily have this high-quality fresh pasta at your disposal everywhere in the world.

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And so there's a tip to look out for, you know, good quality stuff just looking at the packaging. Look for dried pasta that's been made with the use of bronze dyes.

Nesim Bekalti:

It's the dyes that the pasta gets pushed through in the machine, and the bronze actually gives a rougher texture to the pasta, allowing it to absorb more sauce, so you'll get a better final product. And visually, it looks lighter, almost as if it was dusted with flour. And it looks lighter because it's dried at lower temperatures, for a longer period of time so it doesn't become dark yellow, which means that you should be wary of dried pasta that's this deep yellow color and completely smooth, because that's a sign that it's been mass-produced. And ironically, that's what the majority of dried pasta looks like, and why I guess most people assume that fresh pasta is better. And know that if you're under the age of 40, even in Italy, chances are you've never made fresh pasta. You know, I think part of the misconception is that we're constantly like cracking out the eggs and the flour and making the well and doing this at home to whip up a quick meal. But there's stores that sell fresh pasta often for €1 or €2 per portion. They've often been doing it for generations, make spectacular pasta, and so we just go out and buy it.

Nesim Bekalti:

But yeah, that's a big one. Dried pasta and fresh pasta are both incredible and they both have their uses. And so, depending on what sauce you're making, you would choose either one and the other. Unfortunately, there's no easy roadmap for that either. It goes by regionality, personal preference. But yeah, they're both equally valid. One isn't necessarily better than the other.

Katy Clarke:

I definitely had that misconception before I did a lot of travel in Italy. And I think it's very interesting when we have people on our tours that want to do a cooking - or they're doing a cooking class - it's like not always pasta. We do try and include one pasta, but because regionally, the, you know, as well, you're using the dried pasta, like, it might not be really appropriate. So it's a very good thing to point out, actually. The other one is pizza, isn't it? Because everyone thinks pizza is good up and down the country.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, this is another huge one, actually. Pizza is not good everywhere in this country. And I admit, even I was very surprised by this growing up here because - it turns out that only Naples and Rome are the larger, the main cities that are actually famous for their own styles of pizza. I'm obviously biased because I am Roman, but I feel that Rome is a more exciting city for pizza than Naples is. And I know this is very controversial for me to say. Credit where credit is due, Naples originated it, but we have a larger variety of styles of pizza. We have 3 main categories, whereas they have 2. They're both incredibly good.

Nesim Bekalti:

I love Neapolitan pizza. The main difference, the Neapolitan pizza is kind of fluffier and chewier, whereas the Roman pizza tends to be like thinner and crispier, or there's an evolution of it called pizza al taglio, where it can also be fluffy but kind of crunchy. So only Naples and Rome are actually very famous for their pizza and have very high-quality pizza. You can find those styles in other cities, but they're often nowhere near as good, and they're still replicating the style of pizza that comes from these two places. So getting pizza in every other part of the country is a bit of a crapshoot. And if you are going to look for pizza outside of those two cities and there's a town called Benevento near Naples that does this kind of hybrid version between the two. So there are smaller areas that do have their own versions. But if you're looking for pizza outside of these two main areas, you may be sorely disappointed by what you're given.

Nesim Bekalti:

And so one thing to remember is that you should eat pizza in a pizzeria, in an establishment that focuses on pizza. So if you're ordering pizza in a restaurant that has pages and pages of like appetizers, pastas, mains, chances are the pizza is not going to be good. Because you wanna go to a place that focuses specifically on pizza. If they have a handful of other options, that's acceptable, but you really want to go to a pizzeria for pizza. Also, most, depending on the styles, if you want the like wood-fired oven style pizza that's nice and blistered, you tend to only have that at your disposal for dinner because they tend to only fire their ovens in the evening, at least here in Rome. And so if you're looking for wood-fired pizza for lunch, make sure you do your research and maybe ask to look at the oven and make sure that there's wood burning in there because they have gas ovens nowadays that look like the wood-fired ones with flames shooting up the side to make you think there's wood burning in there. Don't fall for it, okay? You're not going to get the same flavor out of the pizza because the wood-burning fire actually adds flavor to it, and it doesn't reach the same really high temperatures that a wood-fired oven does. And so the pizza is not going to cook right, it's going to take longer, it's going to dry out, and you're not going to have the correct flavor or texture in the pizza itself.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, we can't have that. You need to have the correct flavor for sure.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yes.

Katy Clarke:

Okay, so Nesim, you mentioned that there were 4 forces that shape the regional Italian cuisine. Do you want to dive deeper into some of those? Because I think, you know, that there's the symbiosis between the way that you travel around the country and the things - the different ways you can experience Italy, but ways through the food. So each one sort of informs the other, which is - it is really lovely. And it's one of the reasons that I love traveling in Italy so much.

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Nesim Bekalti:

Absolutely. So the main one is microclimates and geography. That's going to be the main factor that shapes what you're eating depending on where you are in the country. Italy is unusually biodiverse because of its unique location and landscape. If you think about it, it's basically one long mountain range - two, but one long mountain range surrounded by water, lying between Central Europe, the Mediterranean, and North Africa. That combination creates an extraordinary range of habitats packed into a relatively small area. Putting it simply, Italy contains more climate zones, ecosystems, and local species than most other European countries combined. Therefore, every region, city, town, village has a very unique selection of ingredients at their disposal.

Nesim Bekalti:

So if listeners remember one thing from this podcast, it's the following: what grows locally determines the region's cuisine. The Alps, the Apennines, the coastlines, the plains, the islands - all create radically different food ecosystems. So if you're in the cold north, you're going to be getting dairy, butter, preserved meats, often smoked.

Nesim Bekalti:

If you move towards the south and the coast, you're going to get more olive oil-driven food with more vegetables, seafood, more quick cooking, cuisine expressa. And this is why towns even a few kilometers or miles apart can cook completely different. If you're on the coast, and you're enjoying a wonderful seafood pasta, and then you drive, you know, 30 kilometers into a medieval hill town, you're going to get a completely different cuisine. I think it's what makes this country so much fun to travel culinarily, you know, that places very, very close to each other have vastly different types of cuisine and what's awesome is they'll all tell you that that's the best possible thing you can eat in the country. Listen to the locals. That's the, the best piece of advice, you know, listen to what they have to say.

Katy Clarke:

It's really interesting though, because even though my mother-in-law emigrated out here many decades ago, she's from the Campania region, which is the region that Naples is the capital of, and she does not know how to cook pasta. Like she, she does pasta with a red sauce, which is tomato-based sauces, basically.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

And she does not do any of the Roman pastas. She doesn't know how to do them. She doesn't do anything from the north, you know. I mean, she'll have a go, but it's not her specialty. So it's really interesting because she, she does enjoy looking at those dishes, but yeah, where she really excels is the ones from her region. So yeah, it's so entrenched in the psyche - in everything that they do. I love it. It's so interesting.

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Nesim Bekalti:

It's in part because it's the same thing here. Like, if I go to - when I was growing up, I'd go to my friends' houses and, you know, their mom or grandmother would be making, you know, lunch, and it was always focused on the Roman things. And if you would talk to them about food from other regions, as you say, it's appreciated, but they focus on what they have locally. And I think that's also in part because, as I was saying before, the reason why Italian food works at being so simple, is because of the insanely high quality of the ingredients you have. And so, if you're in Rome, you're going to focus on those high-quality ingredients and make your Carbonara/Amatriciana because we have incredible pecorino and guanciale, as opposed to trying to make a dish that requires ingredients from other regions that won't be as good where you are. That informs a lot of the way people cook. Obviously, you grow up with and you're used to your region's favorite things, so that's what you tend to cook anyway. But I think that has a lot to do with it too, the availability of these ingredients, which obviously nowadays are a lot more available than they were, say, 150 years ago or so when Italy was first unified as one country.

Nesim Bekalti:

But I think that plays into it a lot as well.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, absolutely. And when you taste a tomato that comes from those volcanic plains around Naples, oh my gosh, like, I think anyone who's ever tasted one of those tomatoes knows that you're never going to taste anything so tomatoey. Like, everything else back home just tastes watery and a bit bland in comparison. And it's that combination of the volcanic soil, the sun, the wind even, the water - all of it goes into making these incredible ingredients. And the fact that Italians respect that and continue to do, in the face of industrialization is something really special, I think. And I've only ever seen it in Japan, I think, in another context. So yeah, definitely the produce is what we've got to look out for.

Katy Clarke:

Okay. What are some of the other factors that go into the regional cuisine, Nesim?

Nesim Bekalti:

A region's historical wealth or scarcity plays a lot into what dishes that region developed. Italian cuisine isn't just about the ingredients that grow in a specific area. It's also about access to them. So wealthier areas and court cities, especially in the Middle Ages, developed like richer, more decadent dishes, long-aged cheeses like Parmigiano-Reggiano, egg-based pastas like we were saying. So if you think of places like Bologna, Bologna is the capital of Emilia-Romagna, which is the region that has the most protected foods. It's where prosciutto di Parma is from, Parmigiano-Reggiano, balsamic vinegar, and the list goes on and on and on and on. You look at Florence, which had noble families like the Medici.

Nesim Bekalti:

The cooking there is going to become richer, more elaborate, because you're cooking for wealthy people that had a lot of money and could therefore splurge on whatever they wanted to. And in fact, it became common in these wealthier areas to actually start mixing these fats. One of the first cookbooks published, called Artusi, actually would talk about how mixing fats - so you would combine extra virgin olive oil, pork fat, and butter, kind of layering all these fats to develop the richest, most decadent, most balanced dish possible. And it's not you'd throw these 3 things in a pot and hope for the best. There's like layering and the steps that you put them in all matter, but maybe you would start sautéing your vegetables in extra virgin olive oil. You would then maybe add some chopped up pancetta or lard or other cured pork product. And then maybe you're finishing your pasta with a little bit of butter to add richness and shininess. And so it's areas that could afford to do these things that develop this richer, more decadent type of cuisine. Whereas poorer areas, which actually applies to most of the country because historically Italy has not been a particularly wealthy country, these poorer areas developed legume-based dishes where beans became a common source of protein.

Nesim Bekalti:

Also, because you didn't necessarily have access to meat on a regular basis. A lot of more vegetable-forward cooking, in part because you could grow your own vegetables. The creative use of offal cuts and scraps because you had to. Pasta made with flour and water as opposed to flour and eggs, because there's also fresh pasta that is simply made with flour and water. The flour and water isn't just the dried stuff. Because eggs are precious in this context. And know that in Italy, eggs are considered a mealtime food. You know, Italians don't really have eggs for breakfast.

Nesim Bekalti:

And so it would be considered way too much of a luxury to put these very precious eggs in your pasta. So you simply make pasta with flour and water. There's actually a term for this kind of cuisine. It's called cucina povera, which literally means poor food. And it's Italian culinary adaptation and ingenuity. And, you know, every cuisine has this. And I find whenever I travel, often some of the favorite things that I end up tasting when I'm traveling are dishes that were born out of necessity. It's easy for a steak to taste good, but to turn cow foot or a head or entrails into something delicious.

Katy Clarke:

Takes a lot more skill. Absolutely. Well, I love the vegetables. I'm all about the vegetables. And as Nesim knows, if I'm in Rome, I just want a plate of cicoria, big, huge plate of cicoria, which are the bitter greens, and I'm a happy person. So it's so diverse and so different. So you can have - we're going to go into this in a bit later, but we'll go into some of the dishes that you can try that are definitely - we'll be covering some pastas, but there's so many different types of dishes that have come from this tradition of, you know, using what they have and making it taste absolutely delicious. Now, Nesim, what about the... Italy is a fairly new

country and it's had its fair share of invaders and people that have stamped their mark on not only the geography and the politics of the state, but also the food.

Nesim Bekalti:

I think many people don't realize that Italy was only unified and became a country in the 1860s. And so prior to that, Italy was actually a bunch of independent city-states. That kind of acted as their own little countries. And so the city-states that Italy was divided into controlled trade routes, taxes on ingredients, access to markets, religious food customs and calendars, which means that Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples all ate differently because they lived differently. They had access to different things. The people that ruled them led different lives, and that translated into how they lived. And so cuisine followed power, trade, and availability of ingredients more so than a national identity. The other main one is occupation, invasion, borders.

Nesim Bekalti:

These have played in a lot, specifically into two main areas. So, Sicily is the area that I think historically was most invaded by the largest number of people. So there's centuries and centuries of occupation, invasion, and each one added really beautiful facets to what is now Sicilian cuisine. And the Arabs, I think, brought the most to it when they moved in. Sicily was essentially an ancient Roman era, like wheat. And so the Arabs brought in irrigation, they brought in terracing of the landscape to be able to grow a much wider variety of things. And they turned Sicily into the highly productive agricultural powerhouse that it is now, bringing in citrus fruit, nuts like pine nuts, almonds, sweet and sour flavors. Spices and sugar in savory contexts.

Nesim Bekalti:

This is why Sicilian cuisine is, is so interesting and, and so diverse and so drastically different to anything that you can find anywhere else in the country. If you think caponata, which is that kind of sweet and sour ratatouille kind of stew that has pine nuts and raisins, or pasta con le sarde, which is this really famous pasta dish with fresh sardines and pine nuts, raisins. I absolutely love Sicilian cuisine, and the, the reason it's so interesting is because of all of this invasion. The other main area where you can see a lot of influence from other regions is actually in the north of the country in the northeast, like especially around Friuli-Venezia Giulia, the borders regioning with like other Eastern European countries. There's a lot of Austrian and Central European overlaps. For example, that's how the spritz came about. The Austro-Hungarian army had occupied the area and the local soldiers were more used to beer and sparkling drinks than they were to the local wine. And so they found the local wine too strong.

Nesim Bekalti:

And so they would ask the local taverna to add a little bit of sparkling water to their wine to kind of make it more palatable to them. In fact, in German, spritz means to splash. I think locals eventually took offense to this, and so they started making up for this watered-down wine by adding a little bit of spirits. To bring the alcohol level kind of back to where they

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thought it should be. The original recipe for the Spritz is 3 parts Prosecco, the local sparkling wine, 2 parts spirit, which the most common is Aperol, but there's dozens and dozens of spirits that you can use, and 1 part sparkling water. And so that's a perfect example. So we can thank our neighbors to the north for the creation of what is now possibly the most famous Italian aperitif cocktail that exists. But if you look at the food of the region, strudel is one of the most common desserts.

Nesim Bekalti:

They use dumplings like the flour and water dumplings, not the Chinese or Asian version. In the north, the very northern regions, Italians often speak Italian with a German accent. So this is the physical manifestation of what, how influential these neighboring regions actually were.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, and you can't really walk more than 200 meters without bumping into a speck shop. Yes, Speck is like the German-style bacon. It's - they're everywhere, and they're - it's delicious, and it's probably not what you're expecting when you go to Italy. Okay, so Nesim, take us on a little bit of a trip across the country, because I think you're able to describe, maybe depending on where you are in Italy, what are the types of things you should look out for. Because, as you mentioned at the start, we really need to focus on seasonal and local food. And that's how you're going to get all the really best stuff.

Nesim Bekalti:

You can think of the cuisine broken down by general swaths of the country. So you have north, center, and south. If you're thinking northern Italy, like South Tyrol, Lombardy, you're thinking climate-driven comfort food. It's very cold. You used to have to trudge through the snow. You know, you need lots of energy to work. And so butter and dairy are a lot more revered because they're higher caloric foods. You tend to have rice and polenta more so than wheat pasta.

Nesim Bekalti:

So you're having this hearty cooking designed for cold winters, think like stews, alpine cheeses, as we were saying, cured meats that are often smoked, mushrooms, cabbages, other cruciferous vegetables. This makes sense if you think of those surroundings. You have lots of rain, lots of snow, very long winters. So you have to think about how you're going to subsist throughout. And so you need mountain storage logic, let's call it, where richer, heavier food is going to get you through the cold, harsh days. There's this really lovely pasta dish called Pizzoccheri, and it's this like wide, short, flat pasta noodle often made with a mix of buckwheat and wheat flour. And then they boil it and they toss it with cabbage potatoes, tons of this local cheese that's like really nice and melty, and a lot of butter. And it's so rich and heartwarming and comforting.

Nesim Bekalti:

It's like a nice big warm hug, especially if you're having it in like a ski lodge. It's the kind of food that really hits your soul and makes you feel cuddled and comforted. Another of my absolute favorites is called polenta taragna. Polenta is basically the Italian version of grits. It's when you cook the ground corn to this thicker consistency, and they add a ton of cheese and butter to it. And often this polenta taragna has a bit of buckwheat too, which adds this really lovely nuttiness to it. And when it's ready, they just pour a bunch of brown butter on top. It's spectacularly good.

Nesim Bekalti:

So yeah, I think cheesy grits with extra melted butter on top, there's kind no way that that can't be delicious. And so that's like the super mountainous kind of food, whereas if you start heading even towards like Milan, risotto is one of their most favorite delicious contributions to our local cuisine. Risotto alla milanese, which is like a saffron-based risotto. So it's this really delicious, rich saffron risotto which is actually finished - there's a step when you're finishing pastas and risotti, polenta, called mantecatura, where you're often adding a fat to kind of enrichen the dish and round it out. And risotto alla milanese traditionally is actually finished with bone marrow. And it's often served with ossobuco, which is the shank of normally veal. And so it has the marrow bone in it. And that's often served with the risotto alla milanese.

Nesim Bekalti:

And so these are very hearty warming dishes, spectacularly delicious, and things you should definitely try if you're in the area.

Katy Clarke:

Let's go into central Italy. Let's make a little bit of a trip down further south and into an area where I think most people are familiar with a lot of the food from here, but they might not know that background.

Nesim Bekalti:

Absolutely. So moving down to central Italy, think Tuscany is obviously the most famous. Lazio is the state that Rome is the capital of. This is where olive oil becomes more dominant because you can finally have olive trees. Olive trees don't grow in the northern mountainous regions. It's too cold for them to grow properly. Pork fat becomes deeply important also because Pigs are relatively easy to raise. They're not particularly choosy about what they eat.

Nesim Bekalti:

You can feed them the scraps that you produce. They kind of, you know, live in the paddock behind your house. And if a family could afford it, especially ones that didn't live in cities, so lived in more rural settings, you would raise at least one pig a year. And that would provide you with a lot of the animal protein and flavorful ingredients that you would then use for the rest of the year.

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Nesim Bekalti:

There's actually this tradition of these traveling butchers called Norcini from a town called Norcia, where they were traveling butchers that would essentially come to your house when your animal was ready to be slaughtered and they would butcher the animal for you and then they would set you up with salame, prosciutto, prosciutto, pancetta, guanciale, and that allowed you to have these cured meats for the rest of the year. And this is where a lot of these sauces actually come in as very ingenious ways of stretching what little meat you had into the most flavor possible.

Nesim Bekalti:

Beans start coming into play a lot as an alternative for the meat that you may not have access to on a regular basis. Breads become a lot more common. Cured pork, grilled meats, And you can think of central Italy as kind of the balance between the inland cooking of shepherds and like more rural living folk and the influence of the coasts where you start getting a lot more seafood, a lot more quick cooking, a lot more vegetable-forward stuff. Examples of things that you might come across in Tuscany, some of my favorites, they make various different types of ragù. Which is the blanket term for any kind of meat sauce in this country.

Nesim Bekalti:

The most famous comes from Bologna, which is why the rest of the world often refers to it as Bolognese sauce. But in Tuscany, depending on what animal you're using, you can have dozens of different types of ragù. You have - my favorite beef stew is called Peposo. It's basically like a beef bourguignon, the French red wine braised stew, but with - it's just a lot of really lovely rich wine and a ton of black pepper, like a couple tablespoons of whole black peppercorns, which sounds insane the first time I heard it, but the pepper kind of braises in the braising liquid and becomes a lot more delicate. It's almost like a red wine pepper steak kind of deal turned into a stew. It's mind-bogglingly good. But even more simple dishes like pappa al pomodoro, You make this really flavorful tomato sauce and then you break in this old stale bread and it's one of the most delicious things you'll ever eat. And the famous ribollita, which is their kind of vegetable version of that, where you take a minestrone, like a nice vegetable soup, and then you do the same kind of thing.

Nesim Bekalti:

You break this bread down into it, boil it again, maybe adding a little cheese, a little extra virgin olive oil. One's nice, heartwarming, spectacularly good, really good for you too. And then, you know, obviously, there's the very famous Fiorentina, the Florentine steak, which is these gigantic T-bones. And this goes back to the fact that it was also a fairly affluent area. The local joke is that anything less than 4 fingers thick is carpaccio because of the animals that they use. The most famous breed there is called Chianina. It's a very lean animal. It's these big white cows, and so you can basically only have it rare.

Nesim Bekalti:

If you ask for it cooked medium, it becomes quite tough. But I almost think of the Florentine steak almost more akin to like, uh, tataki, or like a nice seared tuna kind of thing, as opposed to like a fatty, like marbled steakhouse kind of dish.

Katy Clarke:

Now, Nesim, what about if we move down to Rome? Because they've got some absolutely delicious dishes there. And if anyone wants to go into deep dive into the 4 big pastas from Rome. We have this, and we have even 2 episodes about that, don't we, Nesim?

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, we spoke at length about what we refer to as the Big 4: the cacio e pepe, gricia, carbonara, and amatriciana, which are the 4 most famous pasta dishes from Rome that you absolutely have to try when you're here. They're all based off of 2 main ingredients. The main one is called pecorino romano, this sheep's milk cheese, an aged crumbly sheep's milk cheese that we're famous for here. And then there's guanciale. Guancia means cheek, so it's the cured jowl or cheek of the pig that we use often instead of pancetta. And so guanciale, the cheek, which is part of the head, which was normally a throwaway cut of the animal, some genius realized that if you harvest the cheek and treat it with the same love and care that you do belly, which is a much more prized cut, you get a product that is just as good, if not even better to us. Dishes like Abbacchio alla Cacciatora. This is suckling lamb braised with (cacciatora here in Rome is super simple), it's just white wine, white wine vinegar, garlic, rosemary, maybe a bit of olives. Spectacularly good. But once again, super simple cuisine, making the best of what you have at your disposal.

Katy Clarke:

So what about the famous Bolognese sauce, Nesim? Tell us a little bit about that, because there is, there is some stories that people need to know about this to seek out the, the original and the best.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yes, absolutely. So Bolognese, or ragù alla bolognese, is one of the most famous dishes in the world, often misinterpreted or not necessarily done in the purely traditional form. Anyone from Bologna, please excuse me if I don't get this 100% right. I am not from the region, but, um, it's a perfect example of what we were talking about before when you're talking about fat layering. The biggest mistake people make when making bolognese is they actually put too much tomato. It's actually a mostly meat-based sauce that is held together with a little bit of tomato and then just a lot of different types of fats. You start with ground beef. Sometimes they'll use other kinds of meats, but traditionally it's ground beef. You use some pancetta, the cured pork belly, and then you have the soffritto, the traditional mirepoix, so carrot, celery, onion.

Nesim Bekalti:

Cook all that down until it's really nice and sweated out and rendered. Some people think caramelization is good, some are against it. I think it adds a lovely depth of flavor. And then you add tomato. You can use tomato paste, you can use a canned tomato product, in which case I would always do whole peeled tomatoes, but you don't want too much of it. You would sauté all of the aromats in extra virgin olive oil, and then after adding the tomato, there's wine involved, whether you use red or white, once again, down to personal preference. And once that has cooked off for a while, you finish it by adding milk, and then that cooks down, so that's another level of fat. And then you'll often do the mantecatura when you're ready to eat it with your pasta with some butter, and you add some Parmigiano to that as well.

Nesim Bekalti:

And then you also have the fat from the ground meat that they used. So it's what, like 6 different types of fat in one dish? It's one of the reasons why, when done properly, it's so rich and intense and satisfying. It's this very skilled layering of all these fats without even realizing that they're all in there.

Nesim Bekalti:

Moving further south, if you're looking at southern Italy, think Mediterranean. Now, so olive oil as the backbone, pork is often still very present because I was saying pigs aren't very labor-intensive to raise, they eat almost anything. But you start getting a lot more vegetables, much higher quality vegetables, more seafood, lots of legumes, dishes like pasta e fagioli, pasta e patate, which is pasta and beans. Or pasta and potatoes, pasta e ceci, pasta and chickpeas, all become very, very prevalent. In part because preservation through drying was very, very important.

Nesim Bekalti:

And don't think of Southern food as being, like, light because it's based on seafood and more seasonal ingredients. It's still just as deeply rich and satisfying. And it's actually a testament to Italian cuisine how incredible cooks Italians are and how resourceful they are, that even in southern regions, you get the same intensity of flavor from something that maybe hasn't even cooked for that long.

Katy Clarke:

You haven't mentioned garlic at all, Nesim.

Nesim Bekalti:

So Italians use garlic quite judiciously, and it's in part because the garlic here is stronger and more intense than it is in most other parts of the world.. So when you see recipes that call for 4 to 6 cloves of garlic abroad, here in Italy, you may only need to use 2. And it's also the way that you use garlic influences, uh, the intensity of the garlic flavor. So the more you break it down, the stronger garlic flavor you're going to get immediately, and that eventually dissipates. So if you chop up garlic, for example, you're going to get this huge hit of garlic flavor at first, and then it kind of dissipates. Whereas if you use whole cloves of garlic that

are crushed, it gives you a more delicate garlic flavor over a much longer period of time. When I first started cooking in restaurants here, my colleagues would make fun of me because I added garlic to my ragu, because traditionally it's not part of the actual recipe. I admit that I still will sometimes put some in because I like extra hit of flavor, but it is true that Italians use far less garlic than, say, Italian American cuisine does.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, it's interesting. I don't think garlic salt would be something that you could even buy in Italy.

Nesim Bekalti:

I've never seen garlic salt, and even garlic powder is often looked upon with confusion. They're like, why would you use that when you can just use fresh garlic?

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, I mean, we could do a whole podcast episode on, um, Southern Italian food as well, couldn't we? So, I mean, there's just so many delicious dishes there and so many different influences and in fact, we've got a really good one on Pugliese cuisine that our friend Flavia did. She's a mutual friend, isn't she, Flavia?

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, Flavia's awesome.

Katy Clarke:

She's, uh, she's just so passionate about the local cuisine there. And it's very interesting just to see that the different influences - I mean, bread is very popular down there as well in a different way. Could talk about it for ages. So we were talking about - I interrupted you. You were talking about the islands and what was going on there.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, so they're like their own culinary microcosms. Don't think of them as extensions of the mainland. They're actually culinary worlds of their own. Because of their history, they've shaped completely different food scenes. So we were talking about Sicily before, shows occupation most clearly, and it has probably the most eclectic food, with the use of spices and the dried fruits and that kind of stuff to most other parts of the country. Sardinia, which has spectacular food as well, reflects more of like the isolation that it's kind of benefited from, uh, throughout the centuries. It wasn't colonized nearly as much, and so it reflects more of like its ancient traditions.

Nesim Bekalti:

They have a very entrenched shepherd culture there, and so sheep's milk cheeses are king there. In fact a lot - to not say most of the sheep's milk that we use to make Pecorino Romano often comes from Sardinia. And you get these dishes like porceddu, which is their roasted suckling pig that they use myrtle bush leaves and berries to cook with. It's kind of like this

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wild blueberry kind of thing. Adds this wonderful flair to it. Wonderful, like, sheep stews and things, whereas when you get to the coast, you get a lot more of these like seafood-based dishes. Um, fregola is one of the most delicious pastas you can get here. It's almost like a - I think of it almost like a hybrid between couscous and pasta.

Nesim Bekalti:

You make it kind of like couscous by adding water to flour in a bowl and kind of mixing it with your fingers until you get these little clumps. And fregola is often made with seafood, spectacularly good. Keep in mind that even on smaller islands like Ischia, you're going to have a difference in the food between what you find on the coast and what you find at the very top or in the middle of the island. Also, just because you're on the coast doesn't mean all the seafood is going to be good. There are sneaky people that stock their freezers with frozen fish. By law, Italian restaurants are required to tell you if they're serving you frozen food. They do so by putting an asterisk next to the menu item So especially when it comes to seafood, if you see an asterisk next to a dish, maybe just skip it. If you see too many asterisks on a menu, get up and find another place to eat.

Katy Clarke:

You know what? I've never heard that before. I always learn at least 12 different things from you, Nesim. Amazing. Who knew? Oh, gosh. You know, and Nesim knows how much I love my seafood. I never knew that. It's fascinating, right? This has been outstanding, and this is really why I can't stop traveling in Italy, because you go from north to south, you're having a different experience. It's like, you know, you're not traveling that far in the scheme of things, and you're having this amazing cultural food, wine, total different experience wherever you go.

Katy Clarke:

So you've given us a lot to take in. What are some takeaways that you can help people if they want to go out and explore the regional cuisine in Italy? How would they go about it?

Nesim Bekalti:

I think of it as like there's 5 rules for ordering smarter when you're here. First, order the regional starch. See what they make. If you're in the north, rice, polenta, these things - rice, pasta, polenta - they all exist for a reason. And it'll never be as good as where it's originally from. So make the most of where you are. Order the dish where it's famous. Don't look for it in any other region.

Nesim Bekalti:

Second point: follow the local fat. So if you're in a region that uses butter, go for dishes that contain butter. Trust the coastal logic versus hilltown towns. And so seafood is what you should go for if you're by the ocean. Remember for the asterisk and do a little research, but look at your surroundings, uh, have the geography of the area tell you where you are and what you should be eating. And let seasonality tell you what you need to eat. This country, as you've mentioned, still has a really big market culture. We really focus on what's in season,

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and it means that you're going to get the best possible ingredient at the best time of year for it, which also makes it the cheapest possible time to buy that food.

Nesim Bekalti:

Find out and order what's in season, okay? It's why the food here is so good. Even here, tomatoes are far better in the summer than they are in the winter. And the final thing: don't look for famous dishes everywhere. Let the region tell you what to eat. Don't look for carbonara in Venice or cannoli in Rome because those dishes aren't good in those places. So ask the locals, what do you guys do best? And order that.

Katy Clarke:

100%.

Katy Clarke:

And that's - it's taken me a long time to get to that point. I guess, you know, it's an evolution of your taste and your experience and all of those things. But you've been very lucky today to have Nesim guide you through something that's taken me probably two decades to learn. Although it wasn't a very hard job, I've got to admit, tasting everything and understanding what was good and what wasn't. Uh, Nesim, it's great to have you on as always. Can you let everyone know how they can stay in touch with you and get on one of your tours so you can really taste that Roman cuisine? Because as we mentioned, it's all about the seasonal and the local.

Nesim Bekalti:

So thank you so much. And yeah, it's always a pleasure to be on the podcast. You can find me on Instagram @fullbellytours to reach me. There's my website fullbellytours.com. It has real-time availability. You can book tours directly online and for inquiries or questions about tours. The best way to reach me would be by email. You can reach me at info@fullbellytours.com.

Nesim Bekalti:

It would be an absolute pleasure to show you guys around my neighborhood, and I'm working on a couple possible new tours this year that I hope to have up and running by high season.

Katy Clarke:

That sounds enticing. Fantastic. Well, it's always a pleasure to have you on the show, and we'll have to think up another topic. I think we've got a few in.

Nesim Bekalti:

The bag, haven't we? I have already a couple in mind.

Katy Clarke:

And yeah, absolute pleasure. Oh, thank you, Nesim. Thanks for joining us again today. Pleasure.

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Nesim Bekalti:

Bye everyone. Ciao ciao

Katy Clarke:

Ciao. Listeners, Nesim is the font of all knowledge and my go-to person when it comes to understanding Roman cuisine. And as you can tell, he can deep dive into Italian cuisine overall too. But when it comes to the different regions, it is always great to tap into local expertise. And we have done this extensively on this podcast over the years. So if you want to learn about Tuscan, Pugliese, Sicilian, or regional Italian dishes, we have covered many of them with the help of local cooks and passionate experts who just love sharing their regional cuisine and their dishes and the produce that goes into making them.

Katy Clarke:

I also know many of you are concerned about eating in Italy when you have dietary restrictions and allergies, and Nesim has also done a deep dive on that topic on this podcast, and he shared his passion for Roman pasta and more. So we will link to all of those episodes on the show notes that you will find on our website at [untolditaly.com](https://untolditaly.com). [.com/312](https://untolditaly.com/312) for episode number 312. The episodes are available on all major podcast apps and also on YouTube in an audio-only version. You can also get our entire podcast catalog in ad-free format on the premium version of the Untold Italy app, where we have also included regional food and wine guides so you can look for all the delicious local dishes as you travel around Italy. What you need to do is download the app for free and check out the Milan guide, which is also free. And if you like what you see, you can upgrade to the premium version for a one-time fee. There's no subscriptions because we know many of you are going to Italy only once, and I don't know about you, but I've got too many subscriptions.

Katy Clarke:

Anyway, thanks for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. We truly appreciate all of you, our listeners, joining us from around the world, and we would love it if you help spread the word so we can reach more Italy-loving travelers just like you. The best way that you can do this is by leaving a 5-star rating or review on your favorite podcast app, or forwarding this episode on to a friend who also loves colorful towns, delightful customs, and the magic of regional Italy. Next time we are looking at a creative way to combine some highlights and off-the-beaten-track beauties in southern Italy. But until then, it's, ciao for now.

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