

Untold Italy Episode 336: How to Embrace Italian Culture as You Land in Italy

As soon as you step off the plane in Rome or Milan, there's a rush of excitement. You're finally here, and Italy announces itself in a way that it only knows how. The hiss of the espresso machine and ancient ruins surrounded by cafes, chaotic traffic, and never-before-seen driving maneuvers, people talking with their hands as much as their voices.

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:

Benvenuti, welcome to Italy. You've arrived. Now, how do you go about really feeling part of it? In this episode, I'm joined by my Roman friend, Dese, to explore how to get into the Italian vibe when you arrive. Benvenuti, welcome to Untold Italy, where we help travelers move beyond the checklist so they really feel part of Italy. This is the Untold Italy way. I'm your host, Katy Clarke, and on today's episode, we're going to learn how to feel really part of Italy from the moment that you arrive. Assimilate, if you will. After all, travel is all about embracing new experiences and soaking up what makes each place unique and special. And you know what? I might be a little bit biased, but there really is no better place to do this than in Italy, thanks to its easy, relaxed vibe, encouraging people, and of course, the most delicious food on the planet. Somehow, we all become a little Italian when presented with a plate of mouth-watering handmade pasta or a chunk of life-changing Buffalo mozzarella cheese. Oh my gosh. It is very difficult to suppress your appreciation of this deliciousness. Joining me today is my Roman bestie, Nesim, the founder and tour host at Full Belly Tours, a food tour company that takes you right to the heart of Rome's food district, Testaccio, where Nesim grew up. Nesim and I met back in 2019 on a food tour, of course, and we've been friends ever since. So andiamo, let's get started and learn how to specifically express appreciation, cross a busy Roman road, greet people the Italian way, and in the process, really feel part of Italy.

Katy Clarke:

Benvenuto, Nesim. Welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Nesim Bekalti:

Thank you so much. It's always a pleasure.

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Katy Clarke:

Always, always. Now, Nesim is a bit of a regular here on the Untold Italy podcast, but perhaps this time you can reintroduce yourself for our new listeners.

Nesim Bekalti:

So, uh, my name is Nesim. I run a food tour company in Rome called Full Belly Tours. I grew up here even though I'm not Italian. French mother, Tunisian father, born in the US, raised here. And I worked in restaurants most of my life, so food is my absolute passion. And I feel proudly Roman, so I like to share all of the wonderful, like, food that this city has and to show people that you actually can eat well in Rome, because it's very easy not to, unfortunately.

Katy Clarke:

Oh yeah, but it's very easy to eat well when you go with Nesim. Trust me, people, he's the master. And you know, you may not have been born there and you may not have Italian parents, but I can assure you Nesim is, is very Roman. And when you walk around his neighborhood with him, you will see that he is much loved there by all the locals. So, yeah, it's your home, isn't it?

Nesim Bekalti:

Absolutely. It's the only place in the world where I have a sense of belonging.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

Nesim Bekalti:

It's like my home. And it's also the only place where people will say, yeah, he's one of us.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

Nesim Bekalti:

Because for everyone else, there's something that doesn't quite fit. Whereas, like, here in Rome, you know, when I speak Italian, I have a thick Roman accent. And I'm very, very proud of this city. And Testaccio is the neighborhood I grew up in and run my tours in. And so yeah, it's like a tiny little village. There's about 8,000 people that live here out of the 3 million in Rome. Yeah, if you come on tour with me, it's basically like being like, you know, one of the villagers, as my wife and I call them.

Katy Clarke:

Okay folks, now we have a fun episode planned for everyone today, and it's all about getting into the vibe of Italy when you arrive. So I don't know about you, but whenever I travel to another country, and especially Italy, I like to do a bit of pre-planning and research so that I get into the spirit of the country, understand the cultural norms, and I feel like I'm really part of it because, you know, I don't know about you, Nesim, but being part of another culture is

the best reason to travel. Because, you know, like, it's one thing to see sites like the Colosseum, but it's a whole other experience to figure out how not to get run over in Roman traffic.

Nesim Bekalti:
Absolutely.

Katy Clarke:

So we'll get to some tips on that in a minute, but first, Nesim, do you like to get in the spirit of destinations that you go to? I know you're off to Copenhagen in Denmark soon. Are you prepping up by getting ready jump on a bike and order some delicious smørrebrød.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yes, no, most definitely. And I agree, like, whenever my wife and I travel, we do extensive research, especially like food-wise. And my wife and I basically travel for food. And we basically figure out what else we do based on where we're eating, or, you know, what snacks or what places we're visiting for food. And so yeah, we definitely do a lot of research. And as you say, I think it's important to kind of figure out a bit about the country you're going to. And because one of the things I would always hate is to be like the ugly tourist that's not necessarily aware of doing things, because sometimes you don't even know that you're doing something that is kind of not appreciated or something that, you know, maybe you shouldn't be doing. So I agree, I think it's very important to, you know, do a little research, look up like how people interact, how to greet people.

Nesim Bekalti:

Get like a basic vocabulary down, even if you don't memorize them. What I do is I have - I make like notes on my Notes app on my phone with, you know, a handful of words for restaurants, handful of words for greetings, a handful of words for appreciation. And I think those are especially good because it shows that you're like making an effort to be appreciative and to kind of integrate. Because unfortunately, a lot of people that travel, and this can sometimes be a cultural thing, get to places and they communicate the way they do at home, and that can sometimes come off as being very rude, and that'll rub people like the wrong way and can be very counterproductive. Here, for example, there's like a formal way of addressing people and then like a direct way of addressing people, and if you know the person, addressing them directly is fine, but if you don't, it can come off a little kind of pretentious or a little, like, disrespectful. And so, it's that kind of thing that's good to know before you head to a place.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, right. So, when we lived in the UK, they have a very specific manner, even though I'm half - well, I'm - I am officially a British citizen as well as an Australian citizen. But Australians are very direct, not as direct as the Dutch, but we can be very, very specific. And, uh, it can be very uncomfortable for people who aren't used to that level of specificity when it comes to expressing preferences. And, you know, so I always remember when we lived in

England, people would say, oh, you must come around for a cup of tea. And I go, oh, well, how about now? You know, and that's - they don't, they don't mean that. They mean maybe in the future, some vague time in the future, you know, and pressing them on a date and time is, is really awkward. So yeah, I think we should definitely get into some of especially those language things.

Katy Clarke:

Before we get there, I love getting to a place and you immediately feel like something's different, you know, like it's different than your home. And I just love that feeling. I get so energized. When you arrive in Rome, in Italy, what do you think that feeling is when you arrive?

Nesim Bekalti:

Well, to be perfectly honest, it's one of the things that I'm most jealous of - of visitors, because I'm incredibly lucky to have been raised here, but it means that I've never seen Rome like with new eyes for the first time. And so I've always been jealous of people that, well, obviously, I mean, as I said, I'm very lucky to have been raised here, but I think it must be incredible to experience a city that has so much cultural heritage, so much beauty, so much food. And Rome is a very big city. It's like larger than - the 9 largest cities after Rome in Italy fit within the circumference of Rome, which is why it can seem a bit overwhelming in comparison to, say, Florence or Bologna or Milan or whatever. And so it can be a bit much. Italians are quite animated. We're very affectionate. We're quite loud.

Nesim Bekalti:

And so it can be a bit of a sensory overload. But I imagine it must be spectacularly interesting because I think of Rome as an open-air museum. And I think all the sights that there are to see, you should definitely do your best to see them. But then I also think it's important to take the time to just like, walk around the center a bit, maybe like, away, like down the little alleys, because Rome is so beautiful and we have so much incredible stuff absolutely everywhere. I think one of the best things you can do is just walk around and, uh, like look up at buildings and, you know, listen to the sights and sounds, stop for a coffee, you know, sit in a square for a bit. Try to interact with a local, um, and yeah, you'll get a much fuller experience out of it.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, for someone who's like a frequent visitor to Italy, and my first thrill when I get off the plane is the energy. There's a different energy and it's really fun. Some people might find it scary at first, but you know, the traffic is a little bit chaotic, but there's that. But there's also that there's a fastness and a slowness, and so when people are walking, they're not rushing. No one's when they're walking, and they're sort of like ambling along, and they might be arm in arm with their friend or their partner or whoever. And it's just, it's a different - like, there's these fast-paced scooters zipping in and out, and then you've got this, you know, piano piano, this slower, you know, mode of traveling. Like, I just love that contrast, actually, when you

see that. And then also the noise and the, you know, the honking of the horns and whatnot, like - It's always in the background.

Katy Clarke:

It's just - yeah, it's such a great thing to do, is just to sit there and really soak it all up and just take notice of what's going on because it is different to where you're from. And I think, you know, some people maybe get a bit anxious about it, but if you just notice and just notice the differences and lean into it, I think that's when it gets really exciting.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, absolutely, 100%. And I think it's one of the things that makes travel so much fun because when you're home, you know, home is wonderful, but you know everything, you're used to everything, you know how to navigate everything. And so to get into a new place is always so much fun to me because it's like, well, how does this place work? What does this place look like, sound like, smell like, feel like?

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

Nesim Bekalti:

So yeah, I agree completely. Those first hours or like a day or two when you get into a place are so interesting. And, you know, the more you travel, the more you see, the more your mind, you know, opens, the more things and foods you experience. So yeah, it's one of the things where I've always loved travel. It's like food and travel are my absolute favorite things in the world.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, that's why we like each other so much. So the thing is, I think as well lately, I think fun's gone out of travel a bit. That's why I wanted to talk to you about this. When you suggested this topic, I was like, yes, let's do it. Because travel's got a little bit too - I don't know, like everyone's like, you do have to plan and I'm very good at sharing how to plan because it's - and it's important, you know, if you're going and you want to see things like the Colosseum, you have to these days, unfortunately. It's just, you know, there's - the spontaneity's gone out of that side of things. But, you know, I first started traveling when I was younger. It was that real excitement of experiencing new places and different ways of doing things that really captured my imagination.

Katy Clarke:

And I was saying to someone earlier today, I grew up in the suburb where 2 very big travel brands started. One is Lonely Planet and the other one is Intrepid Travel. And these are really big global brands that started in the same suburb as me where I grew up. And that's Glen Iris, for those of you who live in Melbourne. And Glen Iris is great, it's a lovely suburb, but it's very boring. So, uh, the first opportunity that I had. I was out of there, you know, because I wanted to see the world, and, and it's because of these differences. Okay, so, Nesim, now you

mentioned, um, language and some words and, you know, being respectful with certain words in Italian.

Katy Clarke:

One of the most popular words in Italian is ciao. Let's talk about ciao for a bit, shall we?

Nesim Bekalti:

Because I think people want to say, hey, ciao bella, ciao, you know, but maybe we need to, you know, go a little bit more slowly before, yeah, so ciao is a very versatile word and you can use it for more than just greetings, but it is a greeting that you would use, so it can mean both hello and goodbye. As a goodbye, you can use it in most situations, but it is quite direct.

Nesim Bekalti:

Like, going back to what I was saying about there being a direct way and an indirect way and a more formal way of addressing someone. And so if you walk into a place and you say ciao and you've never been to this place before, you are greeting them, you are putting in the effort, it is nice, but it may not come off like that to an Italian person. Because Italians are very warm and friendly and welcoming, but there's this kind of little dance that is somewhat expected of you, and it would kind of be like coming in guns blazing a bit, no? It's like coming into a place that you've never been to in an English-speaking and addressing someone kind of like saying like, 'Hey!' And so yeah, ciao is great, but I always start with 'salve'. Salve is, yeah, like a polite way of saying hello. It's fairly informal, so it comes off like very easy, but it shows respect. And by addressing especially older people, like someone older than you, but not only, shows that you're being respectful and it makes them more receptive to you. And so ciao is great, especially you're familiar with someone.

Nesim Bekalti:

But like, say, you know, you're staying somewhere and there's like a cafe that you go to in the morning to have your coffee. The first time, you know, be more formal. Then by the time you - if you go back a second time, you know, and by the third they'll probably recognize you, by then you can get a lot more familiar, you know, and they'll warm to you a lot more. Like here in Rome, if you go to a place - like even me who grew up here, if I go to a place for the first time, they tend to be quite stony and cold. By the third time, they're your best friend, you know, because they see that you appreciate them, you appreciate what they're selling, and especially if you're nice and you're polite and you say things like scusi, salve, grazie. It is true that coming from a hospitality background, I always take the time to thank everyone. Because I think a lot of people forget that when you're dealing with hospitality businesses, you are still dealing with humans. And so it is nice to go the extra mile and, you know, it's not just being transactional, where in some countries maybe that is absolutely fine and it's like you're not required to do that little song and dance. But that song and dance is very appreciated here in Italy.

Nesim Bekalti:

And so I think *salve* is one of the best words that you can have in your repertoire because it's a word that Italians don't necessarily expect foreigners to know. And it's a very nice, polite way of like opening the interaction.

Katy Clarke:

Yes, I love *salve*. It's very good. People do look surprised when you say that, actually. Yeah. And also *Buona giornata*, which is, you know, enjoy the rest of your day, basically. And that's a really good one too, because they're not expecting that one either because it's kind of colloquial, right? Not colloquial, but it's just like a more local way of saying things. So you're not going to learn that one necessarily in school.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, no, exactly. And it's ways that locals communicate, and I try to learn like little words like this when I travel too, because it shows - it's a very easy way to show that you've put in the effort.

Katy Clarke:

I agree.

Nesim Bekalti:

And a little goes a long way, and so they'll be much more appreciative. The effort, you know, is, uh, noticed and is welcome, as opposed to some countries where maybe if you try to speak to them in their own language, if you don't - like, I'm half French and I love the French, but they can sometimes be a bit much if, you know, you mispronounce something. They're like, I don't understand, you know. Whereas in Italy, even if you don't pronounce it perfectly, it's still very much appreciated. So as long as you're putting in the effort, then a little goes a long way.

Katy Clarke:

That's so true. Is there any other words that you think might be useful?

Nesim Bekalti:

Scusi, salve, permesso.

Katy Clarke:

Oye, permesso.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, is, uh, how you say like, excuse me, if you're trying to pass. *Prego* is also very useful. *Prego* means you're welcome, but it also means like, after you. So like, I know if I'm walking on a narrow sidewalk and, you know, there's someone that has their shopping bags or, you know, there's an older person coming my way, I'll step out the way and I'll be like, *prego*. And it's a very polite way of saying, like, go ahead, you know, go by.

Katy Clarke:
How do you say grazie?

Nesim Bekalti:

Ah, yes, right. So in Italy, you pronounce all of the letters. And so it's grazie. The Z in Italian is often pronounced as TS, especially in the middle of the word. And so it's grazie. Because it's G-R-A-Z-I-E, and so you pronounce both the I and the E. So if you say grazie, you say grazie, you say grazie, they'll understand it, but it's grazie. The ye sound is sometimes harder for non-Italians to get to.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, and it's thank you. So I think if you're going to make the effort to say thank you, then it's nice to actually say it, you know, correctly if you can. So, grazie.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, and there's also a difference when you're greeting someone between, like, in the time of day you're greeting them. So during the day, say until about lunchtime, it's buongiorno. Giorno is day, buono is good. Whereas in the, like, afternoon, evening, it's buonasera. Sera is evening. Technically, there's a third one, which is buon pomeriggio. Pomeriggio is afternoon.

Nesim Bekalti:

And so theoretically, it's buongiorno until about lunchtime. From lunchtime until about 4 or 5 o'clock, it's buon pomeriggio. And then in the evening, it's buonasera. But to be honest, like, at least in Rome, no one really says buon pomeriggio. So I just do buongiorno until about lunchtime, and then once it's the afternoon, when you're leaving, you say buonasera. It's that extra little thing that lets them know that, you know, you've done the research and they might actually think that you just live there and you're not just a visitor.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, and I love that. And what about if you want to express appreciation for food? Because I think that's very important, you know, the fastest way to make friends with an Italian is to appreciate their food, right?

Nesim Bekalti:

Absolutely. So there's a number of ways to say like delicious. So buono is good. Bello is beautiful. Food-wise, you would always use buono, not bello. So buono, buonissimo is like even more delicious. Delizioso is delicious. Obviously, words are very, very similar. But then the one I prefer to use is spettacolare.

Nesim Bekalti:

Spectacular. And here in Rome, you can even just say spettacolo and they get very, very proud. Like, basically, the more effusive the word, the prouder and happier they'll be. And so something like spettacolare, they will definitely not expect from a visitor, and it will make

them very, very happy. And then there's ways that you can gesticulate, and an easy one that I can describe verbally is by putting your index finger to your cheek and twisting. And that's how we teach kids to say delicious. But there's some hand gestures that you can use too. I'll teach them to you if you come on tour.

Nesim Bekalti:

But yeah, spettacolo or spettacolo is like my favourite one to convey like really delicious. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

What about a hand gesture that people maybe shouldn't use?

Nesim Bekalti:

There's one which I find hilarious, which I think is like the biggest emoji misconception of all times. The chef's kiss emoji, what people think of as like the fingers like coming to a point with the thumb pointing upwards- that's the Italian hand gesture for 'what are you talking about?' And most Italians don't really do the chef's kiss. It is understood what you're doing, but the most common one is you kind of wave your hand in a circular motion, kind of while looking somewhat upset and taking like a deep breath, that shows that, you know, I think of it as maybe like the food is so good that you're fanning yourself because you're a little faint and it's so good that it's making you a little angry. The chef's kiss one I find very funny because to an Italian it just reads like, this was the best food in the world. What are you talking about?

Katy Clarke:

That's so good. Do you know who I reckon does the best waving gesture with the food? I call it the food face. A mutual friend of ours, Andrea, does it really well. Like, I reckon he's got the moves when it comes to that.

Nesim Bekalti:

Absolutely.

Katy Clarke:

Okay, what about when it comes to dressing? Because I know Italians are really - when you arrive, you just notice they're making an effort, you know. I said to my daughter the other day when we went on the train into the city here in Melbourne, and I said, look at this, like, they're all just wearing tracksuits. I know that's the style these days for the kids, but, you know, I said, I - what I want you to do is just keep an eye out for different outfits that look really good. Like, let's see, you know, who's actually made an effort to put their outfit together, you know, because that's one thing I really love when I go to Italy. Even like ladies that are in their 90s are walking along and they're just, you know, completely put together. I love it.

Nesim Bekalti:

So Italians are very - I mean, this is one of the countries of fashion. Where you have like lots of like big-name fashion brands. And so Italians are - they do like fashion a lot. They like looking nice. There's actually a term called 'Fare bella figura', which translates like to make a good figure, but it means like to come across in a very nice way, like you look very nice, like aesthetically. It can be applied to like the way you like act and maybe communicate too, but Italians are very conscious of the way they look and they like to look nice when they leave the house for virtually anything. I mean, sometimes even just to go to the supermarket, you'll see like a lady in full makeup and heels and like looking nice. And as you say, like, you know, you'll see like older ladies head out and they've done their makeup and they've gotten their hair done and, you know, they're wearing like their nice shirt.

Nesim Bekalti:

And so I agree with you, it is appreciated here to make a little more of an effort. As you say, I think in many Western cultures it's like more and more common to just value comfort over anything else. And I admit that, me too, I'll sometimes leave the house in like flip-flops and a pair of comfy shorts and, you know, maybe a tank top or whatever. It is nice, and Italians do appreciate if, you know, make a little bit of effort, especially if you're eating in a restaurant or you're, you know, going to a museum or, you know, you're going down like the main shopping areas. It is something that Italians notice and appreciate when you put a little more effort into it. Plus, it's always nice to, you know, if you look good, you feel good, and you're on vacation, it kind of just amplifies everything. I will say that not all Italians have the best fashion sense, like anywhere in the world, of course. And so sometimes fashion choices here may be questionable.

Nesim Bekalti:

And Italians do definitely love fads. It's often easy to tell what the fad is at the moment because, you know, everyone seems to jump on the bandwagon. But yeah, Italians are very fashionable. It is one of the main countries for fashion, and effort in that aspect goes a long way too.

Katy Clarke:

And I love the hats. People are always wearing hats in Italy. I think it's great. You've got a really good cap that you wear. That's kind of like your signature move, isn't it?

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, I absolutely love Kangol caps, which actually are Australian.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

Nesim Bekalti:

And yeah, here they call it the scopoletta, which is kind of the Kangol is like part of it, but it's like the Sicilian, like, little beret kind of thing. And so, yeah, Italians will often comment on my scopoletta.

Katy Clarke:

I like it too. It's good. All right, so in terms of other habits, so there's some really interesting things. And at the top of the episode, I mentioned about the traffic, and there is actually an art to crossing the road, isn't there? Like, seriously.

Nesim Bekalti:

Oh, absolutely. So I half-jokingly say that it's like a never-ending game of chicken. Whoever hesitates loses and doesn't get to cross. Now, Rome is kind of like the midway point between north and south. So in the north, people tend to drive a little more normally and will maybe respect traffic signs and stuff more. And then the further south you go, the kind of more colorful manner we drive. But the rules that we have in Rome, you can kind of apply anywhere. This is how I describe it.

Nesim Bekalti:

You look at what's going on, no? So you're at the edge of the sidewalk, and if the car isn't too close and isn't moving too fast, you just start crossing the street. You don't really need to look for the zebra stripes, the street crossings, because they unfortunately don't really mean much.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, like, I half-joke that they're mostly decorative. And so you start crossing the street. If the car isn't too close and isn't moving too fast, you must stare at the driver while you do this, or they think you're not paying attention and they'll try to freak you out even more than they normally will. They will stop at the last possible second to make you think that we're not going to stop so that you hesitate and we keep going. And I say we because I do this too. Part of the thought is that if you don't know how to navigate the street crossing, you're going to slow me down. So I'm gonna do what I can to deter you from crossing, and then if you cross, there's like a kind of grudging respect that I will concede. Whereas if I do manage to scare you into not crossing, you know, you may think, ah, maybe you're not from here.

Nesim Bekalti:

Maybe you don't really know how to navigate. And then you shouldn't wave, smile, or do anything nice until the car starts to slow down. Because there you also give away that you're maybe not a local and they may try to scare you into not crossing. But yeah, there's a kind of back and forth. There's this like game that you have to play and they will stop. They actually will.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, and you gotta just look into their eyes, you know, make eye contact basically.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, you're acknowledging that you see them and you're not nervous, you're not scared, you're not hesitant, because all of those are signs that you're not used to crossing here, and so we kind of assume that you're not from here and you don't live here.

Katy Clarke:

And you're gonna slow them down.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yes, exactly. So stare at them, you know, and, you know, I admit I'm not encouraging anyone to do this, but if I'm crossing a street and I see the person isn't slowing down at all, I'll sometimes stop and turn towards the car and stick my arms out like, hey buddy, you know, here I am, I see you too, you know, you're not scaring me. But yeah, there, there's definitely a kind of grudging respect that you give people that cross that way, no? And then once they slow down, once they stop, you can smile, wave, do whatever you like. Also, rushing across the street - obviously play it by ear. If it's like a very big multi-lane and there's lots of cars, feel free to rush through. But that's also something that Italians don't necessarily do. Like, you cross at kind of your own pace.

Nesim Bekalti:

And that, you know, you don't have to kind of rush across either. You know, you're crossing, you're on foot, you know, they're in a car, they're faster, they can get to where they're going.

Katy Clarke:

I love it. It's like, I'm gonna do this my way. But isn't it funny, as soon as you get in, you're like, oh, taking your time, ambling along, and then as soon as you get in the car, the lead foot comes out.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah. And, you know, behind the wheel, I'm like, ah, why isn't this person rushing? Whereas when I'm on foot, I'm like, oh well, why is the car, you know, angry that I'm not rushing?

Katy Clarke:

It's so funny. I've just had a, like, a complete lights-on moment about my husband. He does exactly the same thing. He's so slow when he walks. It's really good. He gets behind the car, it's like, oh. Anyway, oh, so there's other things like timing. And I was talking to Olivia the other day, who's on the Untold Italy team. She's just moved to Denmark and she said, oh, we've totally changed our lifestyle. We started having dinner at 6:30 at nighttime. I was like, oh, that's interesting, because obviously when you're in Italy, there's no way anyone would be having dinner at 6:30.

Nesim Bekalti:

Most places are actually closed at 6:30, and if a restaurant is serving food between like 3:30 and 7, 7:30, it's kind of a red flag. Like, it doesn't automatically make it a tourist trap, but

you know, do a little more research because most locals do not sit down for food between 3:30 and 7. If we're hungry, we'll have like a little snack.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah.

Nesim Bekalti:

And different cities and different areas have different snacks. But it is true that Italians in general eat later. At home, they tend to have dinner around 8 PM, and when we eat out, we tend to eat even later. And so this can sometimes be problematic for cultures that do eat earlier. But I would recommend to, you know, take a local approach. And if you're hungry in the afternoon, maybe have a little snack and hold out for a local place that'll open around, you know, 7, 7:30, 7:45. And that's actually one of the ways that, like, if you want to eat in a place and you can't get a reservation, if you show up right when they open and you say, look, all we want is like a plate of pasta or whatever, Yeah. They'll often be able to seat you because restaurants, good restaurants at least, stagger their bookings so that you don't flood the restaurant at once because then the kitchen comes to a screaming halt.

Nesim Bekalti:

You can't put out food for 50 people at a time. And so it's why often if you walk into a place that's very fancy as soon as they open and you haven't booked, they'll sometimes say, I'm sorry, we don't have a table, even though there's literally no one there.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah.

Nesim Bekalti:

Because the tables have been booked for 7, 7:15, 7:30, 7:45, 8, and so on. But if you do show up and say there's just like 2 of you and you say, look, all we want is like a quick plate of food, they'll often think about it a second and be like, okay, I can seat you, but I need the table back by 9, as if it's an impossibility to eat in less than 90 minutes, you know.

Nesim Bekalti:

And it shows you kind of the way Italians view a meal out. 90 minutes is a rushed meal, whereas in many other countries 90 minutes is like a very long, leisurely, like relaxed -

Katy Clarke:
Yeah.

Nesim Bekalti:

Whereas in Italy it's kind of like a rushed lunch. So yeah, it's definitely worth, in my opinion, uh, waiting to eat at the times that other people do. And you mentioned, uh, Liv in Denmark. I will say that when I, for example, go to Denmark, I follow those societal norms. So I don't cross the street the way I do here because no one does there. And I admit I find it really hard

when I'm sitting at a red light for the pedestrians and there's not a car in sight. Like, my body is twitching to just cross the street. And I'm like, no, I'm in a place where that is frowned upon, so I'm not going to do it.

Nesim Bekalti:

As much as it's my knee-jerk reaction to, that's a perfect example of something that you do to like, fit in and show respect to the society and the societal norms of the place you're in.

Katy Clarke:

Is there any others... of those type of habits that you can think of? I think, you know, you did mention snacks, and that's really aperitivo hour, which is like the most civilized thing in the world as far as I'm concerned, is to have a little drink and a snack before the main meal. I mean, Italians just don't stop eating. It's fabulous, you know.

Nesim Bekalti:

It's funny, I'll say at least half of the conversations you hear when you're walking around, or around other Italians, are about food. They're either talking about what they've eaten, what they will be eating, what they prepared the other day, what they bought at the market, what they plan to cook. It's a very food-centric country, and most food decisions or food choices revolve around digestibility. Italians have this funny fixation with digestion. It's one of the things that allows us to eat the ridiculous quantities of food that we do on a regular basis while remaining somewhat healthy, let's say. And so there's a number of tricks. Like, Italians have a fairly specific way of eating and ordering food and things, and it in part plays to this digestive benefit. So you mentioned aperitivo, which is the practice of having like a drink before your meal.

Nesim Bekalti:

So it's something that started in Milan, if I remember correctly. Between, say, like 5 when you were let out of work and around 8 when you would go to dinner, you would go to a bar. A bar in Italy is a cafe where they also serve alcohol, and you would get like a drink. Often that drink has digestive benefits. So the spritz is the most popular aperitivo drink. The Aperol marketing team has done an incredible job of spreading the spritz to, like, every known corner of the planet. Aperol has bitterness to it. So does Campari, which is the other main liqueur that you use for spritzes.

Nesim Bekalti:

Campari is a lot more bitter, and bitterness is one of these digestive tricks. Bitterness kickstarts the production of saliva and gastric juices, and so it either readies your body for food, or it kicks your digestion back into gear after you've eaten a lot. Lot, which is why Italians also finish the meal with normally a combination of an espresso and then a digestive liquor. The bitterness in the coffee will help you digest, and the caffeine will stop you from passing out into a food coma. But you don't want to be too alert after your meal, so then the digestive liquor - and the whole category, they're called amaro, which is the Italian word for bitter. The amaro kind of, you know, negates the overstimulating effects of the caffeine and

kind of levels everything out. And here in Rome, we call that combination at the end of the meal caffè e ammazzacaffè, which means the coffee and the coffee killer. And actually, this is a big one. If you want to fit in, if you want a coffee in a café, in a bar, you never say the word espresso.

Nesim Bekalti:

And it's espresso, not espresso.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

Nesim Bekalti:

You simply say un caffè. Un caffè, which means one coffee, in that context means an espresso. And then, you know, if you want it with a little foam, it's caffè macchiato. Schiumato actually is foam because schiuma is foam. Macchiato is a little bit of foam, a little milk. And then if you want cappuccino, caffè latte, would specify, but caffè is the way you order an espresso in Italy.

Katy Clarke:

There's so many things, but I think we - you don't need to know all of them, but I think it's good to know a few. Now, Nesim, how about some things that visitors do when they go to Italy that bug Italians? There's always something, I think.

Nesim Bekalti:

So, as we were talking about before, I think one of the most common is not greeting, not being polite and respectful in their eyes. So, say you do walk into a bar and you walk up to the person making - the barista - and you just shout out your order or just call out your order without acknowledging them, without addressing them and saying hello. That's considered quite rude. And I mean, there are Italians that do that too, unfortunately.

Nesim Bekalti:

But that's something that they'll kind of bristle to a bit, you know. You're expected to kind of - or it's nicer for you to address the person first. Another big no-no is being in a market and starting to touch the fruit and veg to select yourself. If you see other people doing that in a market at a stand, it means that that person goes to that stand, knows the vendor, and the vendor, as a special exception, is letting them pick their own stuff. But you normally ask the person to give you however much of whatever thing you want. So that's another big thing that will rub people the wrong way.

Katy Clarke:

When you're in the supermarket, because I do love going into any supermarket wherever I go because the Italian ones are so good, even like, even if it's a supermarket, it's still worth going inside. But if you want to get an apple or anything, you need to put the plastic gloves on, right?

Nesim Bekalti:

Yes, yes, yes, absolutely. So the same area where you'll have like the rolls of baggies to put your like fruit and veg in, there are going to be these disposable gloves. Those are the ones that you need to put on to grab your stuff so that you're not like handling, you know, so that hundreds of people aren't handling all of the fruit and veg that, you know, someone will eventually buy and bring home.

Katy Clarke:

It really makes sense, doesn't it?

Nesim Bekalti:

It really does.

Katy Clarke:

Especially in these post-COVID times. I don't know how much we've learned, but anyway.

Nesim Bekalti:

Another thing is, and this is a big one, and I think that it's very easy to forget this when you're on vacation, but just remember that these are cities where people live, you know. So if you're navigating the, like, little downtown alleys of any Italian city, just remember that - So the sidewalks in Italy are often not the best. They're often quite narrow, they're often quite sloped. So Italians often like to walk in the street, but we are always aware of - if there's traffic coming behind us, in which case we will get out the way, we'll let the car or vehicle pass, and then we go back to walking in the street. And that's something that, especially in the more popular cities - my wife and I recently went to Florence, and the taxis in Florence now, the beeping that trucks make when they back up, taxis have that sound when they're driving forward through the little alleys of downtown Florence because people are just walking the street and they don't get out of the way. Now, I admit what I do is I just lean on the horn and I kind of, you know, make my presence known so people start getting out of the way. You know, before I'm close, because honking here is not as frowned upon as it is in many other places, let's say.

Nesim Bekalti:

But that's a big one. And so just like keeping your wits about you, remembering that as beautiful as it is, there are people that live here and we do need to kind of go about our daily lives. And so that's something that can definitely rub locals the wrong way, especially in the crowded central areas. And even like the way you dress going to certain places. So one of the beauties that this country has is all of the incredible churches that we have. You should dress respectfully when you enter a church. Theoretically, you shouldn't have shorts on. I understand in the summer everyone's wearing shorts, that's fine too.

Nesim Bekalti:

But if you have like a tank top and, you know, shorts and flip-flops, Maybe like visit a church when you're like, dressed a little better, you know, when you have like, a little more covering on. And when you're in a church, as beautiful as it is, remember that it actually is a church. So kind of keep your voice down, be aware of other people there. And I think a lot of people get lost in taking pictures or posting on social media. And I think this goes back to what you were saying about travel being different nowadays than what maybe we were used to growing up. Like, when we were growing up, travel was something that you had to be fairly adventurous to do, you know? Like, you couldn't see pictures of everything. Like, Lonely Planet is one of the things that I used so much growing up because it was a very useful tool. You had like a handful of hostels, a handful of restaurants, some numbers - you know, that list of like words and greetings.

Nesim Bekalti:

Whereas nowadays, I think a lot of people go to places because on social media they've seen like the cool places to see, the pictures you need to take, the viral meals you need to have, and people kind of get lost in that, no? And they forget that there's, you know, people around you and there's more to it.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

Nesim Bekalti:

Which is why I think maybe not everyone - I don't want to say knows how to travel, but, you know, you can get lost in things that you're focusing on.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, you can get really caught up in the moment.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

There's another example that I wanted to give was if you see some people, like, there's some fetishization of nonnas in our culture at the moment, and, you know, older ladies, or even, you know, seeing nuns walking through, you know, Rome, or, you know, It's not okay just to take photos of these people. Like, you need to ask permission, you know?

Nesim Bekalti:

Absolutely.

Katy Clarke:

And I think, yeah, you're right. People just get caught up in the moment and they're thinking, oh, that's going to make a good picture for whatever reason. Well, it's probably going to sit on their computer forever, you know, on their phone forever.

Nesim Bekalti:

That is a really good point. And even like if there's someone like preparing food, So, for the work I do, I do like to post stuff on social media about food. It's very related to what I do, but I always ask, even just to film the food itself. I'm like, do you mind if I'm in a store and I want to take like a video of like the beautiful cheese display a place may have or the fruit and veg? The first thing I do is, do you mind if I film?

Katy Clarke:

Yes.

Nesim Bekalti:

And the sad thing is it's so surprising to most people that I ask because most people don't and they just whip their phone out and they start filming.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

Nesim Bekalti:

And so that's a perfect example of like a little kind of respectful thing that you can do that will make the person see you much more favorably because they're like, oh wow, this person actually like cares and, you know, is asking for my permission. And so even if you're not filming people, It's a good practice to just be polite and ask, but as you say, especially if you want to take a picture of someone, you definitely have to ask them. I think it's sad that people think they can just stick a camera in someone's face and just like take pictures or record. Once again, we're all humans. Let's be nice to each other and respectful of everyone's like space and image.

Katy Clarke:

Exactly. But the thing is, you do get caught up in the moment. It's so exciting. And if you're traveling soon, you know, couldn't be more thrilled. Because when you arrive there and you get to Rome and you get to Italy and you step off the plane, there's just something. There's that energy. And like Nesim said, you go for a walk, you smell the smells, you see the vibe of the place. It's just, for me, it gives me so much energy. And like you said at the start, like, imagine having that first experience and what that first experience is like, you know, to go back to that time when you just go, wow, This is like nowhere else I've ever been before.

Nesim Bekalti:

Yeah, it's, it's one of the absolute joys of travel.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, it is. So that was so much fun. And, you know, like, as we said, the most exciting part about learning in Italy, it's all about discovering new ways of doing things and that you might later adopt for yourself. Or even better, you might discover something new about yourself and

the way that you like to experience the world. And I don't think there's anything better than that.

Nesim Bekalti:
I agree 100%.

Katy Clarke:
Well, you have a good time in Copenhagen, and maybe when you land back in Rome, you might just transport yourself to another place and just think, ah, this is what it's like. The contrast between the very ordered and, you know, manicured Danish sensibilities versus the chaotic craziness and beautiful chaos of Rome.

Nesim Bekalti:
No, absolutely. And I think it's one of the reasons why I enjoy Copenhagen so much. It's the perfect antithesis to Rome.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah.

Nesim Bekalti:
So as you say, everything's like clean and orderly and polite. Everyone's following all of the societal norms. No one, you know, crosses on red lights. Everyone respects everyone's like personal space. And so it's a very nice change of pace to here. Coming back home, it's always, uh, I mean, home is home. It's, it's always great to come back. But yeah, travel is great because it allows you to see so many different perspectives and see how people do things differently and the foods they have and the ways they interact.

Nesim Bekalti:
And yeah, I think everyone should travel as much as they humanly can. And you should definitely make Italy part of your travels if you have or haven't already, because this is really a spectacular place.

Katy Clarke:
And if you really want to experience Rome with a local, definitely get on one of Nesim's food tours because I can tell you now how many people who have listened to this podcast have been on those tours that write to me and say it was the best thing that they did. So, grazie, Nesim, as always for joining us. And yeah, I hope to see you soon.

Nesim Bekalti:
Yeah, I really look forward to it. And thank you so much. It's always such a pleasure to be on the podcast with you.

Katy Clarke:
Ciao, ciao.

Nesim Bekalti:
Ciao, everyone.

Katy Clarke:

Listeners, it's always a pleasure to chat with Nesim. He is such a genuine and fun guy who has a passion for sharing his city via its food. As I mentioned before, we have quite the back catalog of recordings together, and so you can find them easily. We'll list them all on the episode show notes over at untolditaly.com/336 for episode number 336. As always, you'll find a full transcript of today's episode, including places and concepts mentioned there also. Now, before I sign off, something Nazim said to me today has stayed with me. He talked about the little song and dance that you do when you walk into a place for the first time in Rome or anywhere in Italy, really. You say 'Salve', not Ciao. Wait till the third visit before you get familiar with your barista. Say grazie properly, and buona giornata on the way out. None of this is very hard, but you have to know it before you go because you can't learn the feel of a place from a checklist of sights and experiences, and that's the whole point of getting into the vibe and starting to feel part of Italy. If you enjoyed today's show, please help support our work by subscribing or leaving a rating or review in your favorite podcast app. That helps us reach more Italy-loving travelers just like you. If you're joining us on YouTube and to joy- If you're joining us on YouTube and enjoyed today's show, we release new videos every week. Hit Subscribe so you don't miss a thing. Next week on The Untold Italy Podcast, I'm going to share more about our philosophy on traveling in the 21st century. But until then, it's ciao for now.