

New Foods From the Old World

There's more to classic Italian fare than pizza, pasta and gelato. | BY IVY GRACIE

We all know when we travel to Italy we're going to get crusty pizza that's perfectly imperfect with just enough dots of fresh mozzarella and basil to make each bite memorable. We can't wait to sink our teeth into pasta that defines al dente and savor it with sauces so flavorful we can't believe they're prepared with only a handful of ingredients. And we anticipate the happy pursuit of the world's creamiest gelato, knowing that once we find it, we'll have to gobble up as much as we can because we'll never find anything like it again — until our next trip to the Boot.

But there are other culinary delights that don't get the same rave reviews as the more obvious hallmarks of Italian cuisine. And like any well-guarded secret, they're worth discovering.



Garciofi (Artichokes)

Leave it to the Italians to find beauty in such an angry-looking, misunderstood vegetable. They've embraced it, tamed it and turned it into a favored food that's grown in almost every region. Rome is most closely associated with the artichoke, and within the city limits, you'll find two extraordinary preparations.

Carciofi alla Giudia (Jewish-style artichokes) is one of the most beloved dishes of Roman Jewish cuisine. Cleaned and trimmed, the whole artichoke is submersed in oil, fried to a golden crisp then lightly salted. Savory, tangy, chewy and crispy, it has appeared for generations on the tables of families breaking the fast after Yom Kippur. Today, it's served as an appetizer in Ghetto di Roma eateries.

Carciofi alla Romana (Roman-style artichokes) is a mainstay throughout the city. The vegetables are cleaned, prepped, opened slightly, and stuffed with a mixture of garlic, salt, pepper, parsley and lesser calamint (an herb akin to mint and oregano). Then they're braised in water and white wine. The result? A rich, rustic combination of texture and flavor that demonstrates the depth of the artichoke — and of Italian cooking.

Pesto

We're all familiar with pesto Genovese, its deep, earthy garlic comingling with sweet basil, buttery pine nuts and aromatic Parmesan in a bath of olive oil. But it's by no means Italy's only interpretation of this classic sauce.

Pesto *rosso* (red pesto) incorporates sun-dried tomatoes to give it an acidic intensity. Look for it around the Cinque Terre. A similar adaptation found in Sicily, pesto *alla trapanese* subs in fresh tomatoes for their sun-dried counterparts and almonds for pine nuts. Other Sicilian incarnations are more daring, like pesto *di capperi* (caper pesto), with its anchovies, capers, oregano, red pepper and red-wine vinegar. Along the Amalfi Coast, pesto *Cetarese* is a bold blend of anchovies, capers, pine nuts, almonds, walnuts, basil and parsley.

From region to region, one constant remains in the preparation of pesto: the use of fresh, local ingredients. Wherever your Italian travels take you, keep an open mind — and an open mouth.



Dolci (Sweets)

Cannoli, gelato, marzipan, pignoli cookies, tiramisu — we know them well and love them all. But some Italian treats are sure to surprise.

A trip to Sicily is not complete without enjoying *iris fritto* (fried iris). These darling little fritters are plumped with a mixture of sheep's milk ricotta, chocolate, eggs and milk. Just walk another mile or two to work it off; it's not hard to do there.

For gluten-free chocolate lovers, torta Caprese is a must. This moist, dense mixture of dark chocolate, almonds, butter, powdered sugar and eggs is a satisfying finish to any meal.

Brioscia con gelato (brioche with gelato) is the Sicilian version of the ice-cream sandwich, and it's exactly what it sounds like: warm brioche filled with gelato. Amazingly, this is considered breakfast fare by some. Perhaps you'll give it a try for the morning meal. You are, after all, on vacation. **AL**

