

Food in italy essay



There is a saying that states ‘one either lives to eat or eats to live’ and Italy as a country is ruled by the former. Italy is a culture that is rich and saturated in their traditions of cooking. They take pride in their food and live by the credo that food is only used if it is fresh, local and in season. There has been much debate on what defines Italian food and through research one can see that Italian food is not typical of a specific dish, rather that each region offers a new variance of depth and originality that is not common to the Americanized beliefs of solely pasta and pizza.

Yes one could lump Italian food into categories such as breads, pasta, olive oil, cured meats and cheese but each of these foods is made in such a different way depending on the region that to really understand the country and the roots of its food one must look deeper into the individual regions. The twenty regions of Italy, as shown in Figure 1 are full of their individual gastronomy and it would take days to discuss all of them. For the purpose of this research paper the regions of Piedmont, Tuscany, and Sicily will represent the regional cuisines from northern, central and southern Italy.

This paper will describe the cuisines of each region through the geography, starches, fats, fruits, vegetables, proteins and dairy, comparing differences that exist from one region to another and the connection between diet and the domestic capacity to provide the necessary ingredients. This paper will go on to discuss the health benefits of the Italian Mediterranean diet and what the country has done to sustain it. Figure 1: Regional Map of Italy
Source: Kostioukovitch, E. (2009). Why Italians love to talk about food.

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. ix. Copyright 2009 by Jeffrey L. Ward.

Taste of Northern Italy: Piedmont Food in the north has made a big impact on the culture of northerners as regions gather at festivals and parties to celebrate the harvesting of produce. Using Piedmont as an example, this section will discuss the traditional foods and dishes found in northern Italy and the regions domestic capacity to produce them. These foods are based largely on rice and polenta instead of pasta that is typically found in the south, game animals such as pheasants or wild fowl, the use of butter and lard instead of olive oil and of course magnificent cheeses.

Piedmont is situated in the northeast of Italy bordering France and Switzerland and focuses on rich hearty meals. Piedmont is Italy's wealthiest region and their gastronomy is known for being French inspired focusing on refinement and perfectionism (Thorn, 2005). Piedmont has the greatest agricultural differences in all of Italy due to its variety in topography. The land there is comprised of mountains, the Alps, which transform into rolling hills, low valleys and high river beds. Much like the rest of Italy Piedmontese pride themselves on using seasonal, fresh and local ingredients (Roden, 1990).

Pasta is not as popular in the north as it is in the south therefore the people of Piedmont rely on polenta and rice as the starch in their diet. Polenta was once considered peasant food and its growth is celebrated on the last Sunday of April each year. Polenta accompanies many meat and vegetable dishes such as puccia which contains pork, cabbage, butter, polenta and seasonal vegetables (Riley, 2007). Rice based dishes are at the fore front of

Piedmontese cooking as they hold over half of Italy's rice growing land and export approximately 70% around the world (Blengini & Busto, 2009).

The most well known varieties of rice produced are Arborio and Carnaroli. One of the most popular dishes made with rice in Piedmont is called risotto which can be mixed with frogs that are found in the rice fields, cheese and wild mushrooms (Costanza, 2009). Due to the varying geography Piedmont has a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. In the hills apples, peaches, cherries and strawberries are grown. In the valley a nice selection of yellow, green and red peppers, artichokes, asparagus, cabbage and cardoons are harvested (Riley, 2007).

One way Piedmontese love to eat their vegetables is with a bagna caurda, one of their most authentic dishes. In a terracotta pot, garlic and anchovies are simmered with olive oil to form a thick sauce, then raw seasonal vegetables and breads are dipped into the sauce and eaten. Although this is one of Piedmont's prized dishes, the climate is not conducive to grow olive trees and therefore to produce olive oil. However, Piedmont has a standing relationship with neighbouring region Liguria and trades wine for olive oil (Costanza, 2009). The food richest in tradition, uniqueness and specialty to Piedmont is the white truffle.

Each year a truffle festival is held on the first Sunday of October bringing in thousands of people from all over the world to hunt for truffles and celebrate the harvest. Truffles are a beautifully aromatic mushroom that can be grated on top of salad, pasta or risotto dishes (Roden, 1990). Autumn is the best time for cooking in Piedmont as it is game season, frog and snail season and

most products are ready for harvest: grapes, truffles and wild mushrooms (Kistioukovitch, 2009). Protein in a Piedmontese diet mainly comes from pork, cattle and game.

Since Piedmont is situated inland fish is not a staple in their diet. Freshwater fish and trout are found in some mountain streams with eels and frogs found in the rice fields. However, a healthy diet of saltwater fish as found in the south of Sicily is unattainable (Roden, 1990). Therefore, Piedmontese are world renowned for their cattle which is rich in flavour and tenderness. Not only is this region the largest producer of beef in Italy but they are also known for their use of donkey, goose, goat and pig in various dishes. These meats are often used to make homemade sausages, pates, salamis and cured meats.

What differs in Piedmontese use of cured meats is they use all parts of the animal as a delicacy. For example galantine is the head of a pig from the shoulder up, including tongue and throat which is rubbed down with rum, bay leaves, anise seeds and nutmeg (Riley, 2007). Piedmont's large source of cows helps to lead the region in producing an abundance of cheese and butter. Butter is used as the main source of fat in Piedmontese cooking and is one of the main distinctions in north and south cooking as southern food mainly uses olive oil. Two of the most popular cheeses in Piedmont are Bra and Castelmagno.

Bra is made mostly from cow's milk with a small quantity of goat or sheep's milk to round off the flavour. Semi-firm Bra is aged for at least forty five days while hard Bra is aged for over six months. Bra cheese is often used in local

dishes such as risotto or polenta (Costanzia, 2009). Castelmagno is a blue cheese made largely of cow's milk and is considered to be very aromatic due to the fields the cows graze on. This cheese is heated, cooled then pressed and aged in cool dark caves. Castelmagno is often eaten on its own or dipped in honey (Riley, 2007).

Italians are not big fans of sweet dessert; they prefer cheeses, fruits and biscuits at the end of a meal. However, Piedmontese are known for their love of pastries and desserts (Riley, 2007). This is in large part due to their production of hazelnuts, chestnuts and chocolate. Hazelnuts are mostly used in confectionaries and mixed with Piedmont's chocolate to make world famous desserts. Some examples are Ferrero's Nuttella, a hazelnut chocolate spread, giandujjooti, hazelnut chocolate squares and nougat, a mixture of vanilla, sugar, honey and hazelnuts that form a soft texture (Costanzia, 2009). Taste of Central Italy: Tuscany

Eating together at long tables with family and friends is the culture that revolves around food in central Italy. Central Italy has the best of both northern and southern foods and cuisines. Typical foods include a wide selection of artisanal breads, smooth olive oils, fish, cured meats, beef and cheeses. The region of Tuscany will be used to describe these dishes and the domestic capacity to produce them. Tuscany is considered to be part of central Italy located on the west side of the country. Tuscany's coastline is situated in-between the Ligurian Sea to the north and the Tyrrhenian Sea to the south.

Adorned with stunning landscapes, the rolling hills of the Apennines and brilliant light, Tuscany was once considered one of the wealthiest regions of Italy (Roden, 1990). Tuscans are known for demanding quality products but using them in simplistic ways in their cooking. They eat local in-season produce that is preferred to be eaten unmasked by heavy sauces as seen in the south. Traces of Spanish, French and Jewish influences reflect in their cooking. They prefer the rustic sense of cooking such as eating food raw, grilling food over coals or cooking over open flame.

Different types of food require different types of wood, offering new, exciting aromas and flavouring agents to the produce. Meat is smoked over olive wood while bread is baked in oak wood. Tuscans enjoy the food that comes right from the farm to the table and specialize in breads, vegetables meats, seafood and fine cheeses (Kostioukovitch, 2009). The estates in Tuscany produce wheat, spelt and corn which help in the processing of pasta and breads. Chestnuts are plenty in Tuscany and are usually ground into chestnut flour, a major export in Tuscany, for the use of making bread (Roden, 1990).

Tuscan bread is a staple ingredient in almost all meals and differs from other regions in Italy because they do not use salt in the making. Tuscans believe that their food is already full of flavour so why waste added ingredients that are not needed. Due to the lack of salt in the bread it slowly absorbs moisture and therefore will last for many days. Tuscans are firm believers in ‘waste not want not’ and will reuse the stale bread in hearty soups such as ribollita filled with Tuscan kale, fresh white beans, potatoes, tomatoes,

Tuscan bread and olive oil (Ohrback, 2006). Another classic use of Tuscan bread is bruschetta.

Bruschetta consists of round crusty bread, drizzled with olive oil and topped with a variety of ingredients; tomato and basil, vegetable or meat pates, cured meats or truffles and cheese (Ohrback, 2006). Tuscans are known for their fresh hand stretched pasta such as pappardelle and pici, as well as their stuffed pasta; tortellini and ravioli. Tuscan pasta differs from southern pasta as it is fresh, not dried. Fresh pastas are made with eggs and must be eaten within two days; however dried pastas are not made with eggs and have a shelf life of over a year (Alexander, 2000).

Olive oil in Tuscany is considered to be one of the most important ingredients. Because Tuscans like to keep their meal simple and are not fond of heavy sauces, olive oil is used daily to drizzle over pastas, breads and vegetables, used as dressings for salads and is also used for cooking numerous products. Tuscan's olive oil production is low compared to other regions such as Puglia or Sicily in the south. However, it is regarded as some of the highest quality olive oil produced in all of Italy with Tuscany's extra virgin olive oil topping the list. (Costanzia, 2009).

Due to the different olive trees, soil and weather, olive oil in Tuscany is much lighter and more delicate than southern olive oil. Tuscans participate in a traditional dish called pinzimonio which is similar to Piedmont's famous bagna cauda. The difference in Tuscany's version is that the olive oil is not heated and is mixed with vinegar. A different selection of vegetables are also provided to dip in the sauce; artichoke, endive, tomatoes, asparagus, carrots

and radishes (Kistioukovitch, 2009). Located in the lagoon situated on the Tuscan coast one can find a selection of bass, tuna, trout and eel.

These fish are often grilled and eaten on their own or found in soups. Eel is a favourite of Tuscans and is eaten cold after it is fried with breadcrumbs, garlic and olive oil (Kistioukovitch, 2009). Tuscans are very fortunate to have a selection of fish in their diet as there is also a strong presence of meat. Meats such as rabbit, duck, pheasant and chicken are often found on Tuscan farms and are stuffed inside ravioli or eaten on its own (Alexander, 2000). The meat that stands above the rest in Tuscany is the Chianina ox.

Using the meat of the ancient ox raised in the Chianti valley, Tuscany's most prized dish is called bistecca alla fiorentina. Cut from the loin of the cattle, this piece of steak must weigh at least 450 grams and is usually grilled on both sides for about five minutes without any seasonings or salts (Costanzia, 2009). Tuscany is world famous for their quality pork products: specifically cured meats. Some of their cured products are finocchiona which is a salami flavoured with fennel seeds, prosciutto di Toscana which is ham that has been cured for over nine months and has a stronger taste than that of the Parma region (Ohrback, 2006).

Lardo di colonnata is the most famous cured meat of Tuscany. What makes lardo di colonnata different from other cured meats is the preservation of the pork in Colonnata's marble quarries. These quarries are rubbed with garlic and herbs, then fatty pieces of pork are massaged with sea salt and are placed inside the hollow cavities. A layer of fresh local rosemary, sage and

garlic, cracked black pepper and more sea salt are placed on top of the first layer of pork and the process is repeated.

After the layering is finished the tub is closed with a marble slab and is left for over six months (Kistioukovitch, 2009). Sheep that graze the valley in Tuscany are used to produce pecorino Toscano cheese. The aging process starts anywhere from twenty days, for a soft delicate flavoured cheese to over four months, for a semi-firm intense flavour cheese. One thing that differentiates pecorino from other cheeses is that the rinds of the cheese are often different colours. This is because Tuscans line the inside of the mould with tomato paste, for a red rind and charcoal, for a black rind (Costanzia, 2009).

Taste of Southern Italy: Sicily Southern cooking is considered to be the healthiest form of the Italian Mediterranean diet. Southern culture lies deep in the rituals of celebrating food with family. A southerner's day is organized in relation to food; harvesting, cooking meals and of course eating. Olive oil is used exclusively as a cooking fat, many forms of pasta are adored, a wide variety of citrus fruits and vegetables are grown and the proximity of the seas lends itself to the primary means of obtaining fish as a protein.

This section will discuss the traditional foods and dishes found in southern Italy, as represented by Sicily and their domestic capacity to produce these foods. Southern regions and Sicily in particular are poorer than most northern regions. Although their food may be considered humble this does not stop Sicilians from getting together with family and friends, hugging, kissing on the cheeks and celebrating every occasion with food (Roden,

1990). Influences from Greeks, Romans, Normans, Arabs and North Africans make Sicilian food the most diverse and aromatic in Italy.

Food produced in Sicily is said to have vibrant colour and intense flavours, this is largely due to the radiant sun, the volcanic soil, and the fact that Sicily is surrounded by three seas (Kistioukovitch, 2009). Due to its topography, Sicily is a large producer of cereals, hard wheat or semolina being their major product. This wheat is exported to other regions of Italy to help in the production of pasta and bread. Even though Sicily is a main supplier of wheat for Italy, their bread traditions are not as prevalent as those of Tuscany.

Breads in Sicily differ as they are often filled with other ingredients such as *guastedde*, filled with calf's spleen and *malateddi*, filled with minced pork (Riley, 2007). Although there have been many conflicting stories of the origin of pasta, historians believe that it was brought to Sicily first. Unlike the northern regions Sicilian pasta is called dry pasta due to their cultivation of hard wheat on the island. Sicilians eat typical pastas of the main land of Italy such as *maccheroni* and *vermicelli* however they are known for a wide selection of their own hand made dried past.

Taccuna is indigenous to the area and gets its dark colour by cuttlefish ink. Sicily is also known for such tubular pastas as *macaroni* or *crosetti* which are *cannelloni* made with semolina and *fussili*, a spiral shaped pasta (Alexander, 2000). The Sicilian diet mostly consists of vegetables and is therefore considered the most important food in Italy. Eggplant and artichokes are among their favourites and grow abundantly on the island. These along with peppers, zucchini, pumpkins, and local kinds of cauliflower and broccoli are

often grilled over charcoal and tossed with regional olive oil and fresh parsley (Riley, 2007).

The hills of Sicily are dotted with orange, mandarin and lemon tree orchards. Other fruits include peaches, figs and prickly pears. One of Sicily's prized products is their selection of nuts; eighteen types of almonds, one of Sicily's largest exports, pistachios, walnuts, pine nuts and hazelnuts (Riley, 2007). Sicily is also a producer of olive oil with about 155, 000 hectares of land covered with olive trees representing about 15% of Italy's olive oil cultivation. Not only are olive trees more abundant in the south than the north but Sicilian olive oil produces more of an aromatic flavour compared to Tuscany's fruity flavour.

Another differentiating factor of Sicily's olive oil is they are the second top region of organic cultivation (Crescimanno, Di Marco & Guccione, 2002). Sicilians turn to the Tyrrhenian, Mediterranean and Ionian Sea to find their main source of protein: saltwater fish. A Sicilian's typical diet is composed of more fish than meats which is contrary to northern diets such as Piedmont. Sicilian's most predominant fish are swordfish and tuna as well as sawfish, mackerel, and sardines (Kistioukovitch, 2009). In ritual, Sicilians once harpooned swordfish while chanting Greek songs, a tradition from the Byzantines.

However nowadays swordfish is caught by nets, much like tuna as Sicilians believe it has a more rich and full flavour. Sword fish is rich in protein, healthy fats and vitamins and is versatile in the kitchen (Costanzia, 2009). Because Sicilian's meat production is low and therefore minimal cured

meats, Sicilians like to preserve their fish in oil or salt as an alternative. The exporting of salt is a big industry in Sicily. Since Sicily is surrounded by a variety of seas each salt offers a different flavour making Sicilian salt one of the most prized commodities in Europe (Kistioukovitch, 2009).

Sheep and cattle are allowed to wildly graze the hills of Sicily but are not often eaten as the constant movement between mountain and coasts gives the meat a tough texture. However, as sheep and cattle graze they eat the aromatic herbs over the island lending a scrumptious flavour to the milk they produce (Roden, 1990). This milk is then turned into cheese such as Sicily's most popular cheeses ragusano and ricotta. Ragusano is typically aged from four months to about a year but can also be eaten fresh. This cheese is shaped into a rectangular form by using wooden blocks before it is placed into brine to age.

Matured ragusano is great for grating overtop of pastas and salads and softer version are typically used for grilling. Ricotta cheese has a creamy texture and is made by gathering left over whey, boiling it, skimming it and then hanging it in cheesecloth to drain. Ricotta along with chocolate and candied fruit is used as a cream filling in a fried biscuit in one of Sicily's signature dessert dishes, cannoli (Costanzina, 2009). Italian Diet: A Mediterranean Perspective Geography, culture, history and climate are all factors that affect Italy's version of the Mediterranean diet.

The Mediterranean diet consists of a moderate consumption of dairy products usually in the form of cheese, a healthy serving of vegetables and fruits, unrefined cereals and nuts, minimal use of red meat, with increased

consumption of fish and olive oil as their only source of fat (Karampola, Panandreu, & Makedou, 2011; Fidanza & Alberti, 2005). The Mediterranean diet is said to be one of the healthiest diets as it is high in omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, essential minerals and vitamins among many others.

Studies have shown that when Italians follow their Mediterranean diet many health benefits ensue such as an increase in life expectancy or longevity, reduction in cardiovascular morbidity, reduction in certain types of cancer and improvement in mental health conditions (Karampola et al. , 2011).

Unfortunately, due to the increase in fast food and westernized practices, the Mediterranean diet is at risk of being abandoned. Therefore, a set of food standards must be put into place in order to sustain such the health and cultural tradition of the Italian Mediterranean diet.

Sustainability of the Italian Mediterranean Diet The Italian agri-food system has put in place a set of standards in order to protect and sustain the quality of Italian food products. Focusing on three areas; traditional local food, origin of food and the production process ensure high quality of Italian food (Costanzia, 2009). Having a controlled process allows for the traceability of a product from the hand of the farmer through all the processes necessary to arrive at the consumer. This also ensures that all health and safety standards are upheld during each level of processing.

The European Union had classified three levels of certification for ‘ typical’ products of a specific area: Denominazione di Origine Protetta (DOP), Indicazione geografica protettata (IGP) and Specialita tradizionale grantita (STG) (Costanzia, 2009). DOP refers to the designation of protected origin of

a product. After meticulous inspection and continuous control, a product receiving a DOP stamp signifies that the product is produced and processed exclusively in a specific geographic region. IGP refers to products that are special to a region but are made with materials from a different region.

Finally, SGT or guaranteed traditional speciality refers to foods produced by traditional methods and not necessarily related to a specific area of origin (Costanza, 2009; Riley, 2007). These labels help keep products in Italy sustainable as “the logo guarantees to an establishment that has won it the legal right to protection from inferior competition and imitation of its food product, because it has been proven, after rigorous scrutiny, to fulfil an exactly specified definition” (Riley, 2007, p. 160). Another concept that has led to the sustainability of Italian food products has been the Slow Food movement.

After fast food began to rapidly grow in Italy, locals and tourists stopped supporting local producers which in turn almost led to the extinction of Italy's national heritage (Riley, 2007). Something had to be done in order to preserve the cultural traditions of Italian food before it was lost forever and in 1989 the Slow Movement commenced in the effort to stop fast food from endangering Italy (Kostioukovitch, 2009). The Slow Food movement encouraged tourists to travel off the beaten track to taste flavours of Italy they have never experienced.

It also allowed small producers to make their products available a larger customer base as “support for quality, sustainability, biodiversity, could be organized and publicized world wide” (Riley, 2007, p. 502). The Slow Food

movement has gained increasing interest throughout Italy's neighbouring countries and is now a global phenomenon (Kostioukovitch, 2009).

Conclusion To say that Italian food is typically defined as pizza and pasta would be very narrow minded and naive. In order to discover the typical cuisine of Italy one must look at each region separately as cuisines vary from coast to mainland, north to south and city to city.

In relation to geography, starches, fats, fruits, vegetables, proteins and dairy, the differences from region to region and their domestic capacity to produce these ingredients were explored. Due to the vast amount of regions in Italy, Piedmont, Tuscany, and Sicily were discussed as a representation of north, central, and southern cooking in Italy. An exploration of the health benefits and sustainable practices of the Italian Mediterranean diet are necessary in order to preserve a cuisine that is rich in culture, heritage and tradition.