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ON THE WEB

The Bounty of Rome



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

At Osteria dell'Angelo: a puntarelle salad, tripe and tonnarelli cacio e pepe, a typical Roman pasta with cheese and pepper.

By MIMI SHERATON

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HOW does [Rome](#) taste? An odd question perhaps, but the sort that comes to mind when I read travel accounts that define cities by sights and sounds, colors and tempo. What about the flavor, I wonder, meaning that more literally than figuratively.



At Volpetti, a delicatessen in the Testaccio neighborhood, from top: Emiliano Volpetti, the owner, sniffs a Parmesan cheese; a pizza out of the oven.

Say Rome to me and my first thoughts are not of the swirling traffic around the marble wedding cake that is a monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, nor of the eaten-out stone melon that is the Colosseum, nor of the "Dolce Vita" set as immortalized by Fellini. Rather, I think first of the creamy foam, or spuma, that tops lightly sugared espresso at the always jammed Sant'Eustachio around the corner from the [Pantheon](#), the coffee bar that I still consider this city's best.



Next, thoughts turn to Rome's own big, round globe artichokes available from late February to mid-April and most succulent simmered in olive oil with mint and parsley — alla Romana — or as carciofi alla giudea— flattened and fried to resemble dried sunflowers and one of the many Jewish culinary inheritances from the city's Ghetto — preparations that do almost as well by other artichoke varieties in other seasons.

Among Roman pastas, I remember favorites such as the guanciale-and-egg-decked carbonara, cacio e pepe with its cheese and pepper sting, the mellow tomato-and-onion-sauced amatriciana and the unusual, delectable pajata (pronounced pie-YAH-tah), pasta tossed with chopped intestines of newly born lambs that still hold remains of milk, resulting in a creamy, meaty tomato sauce. And gnocchi alla Romana, unlike others in [Italy](#), are rounds of semolina baked under a golden glaze of butter and cheese, an elegant variation.

These lusty eaters enjoy their meats close to the bone, gnawing through roasted abbacchio lamb, suckling pig or braised oxtails. They dote on innards like tomato-simmered tripe and tantalizingly chewy coratella, a savory hash of mixed lamb organs. Suffusing all are the seasonings that define the Roman kitchen: the air-cured pig's jowl bacon called guanciale; salt-etched anchovies; garlic; fiery, red peperoncino chilies; black pepper; the pungent sheep's milk cheese pecorino; and rosemary, sage, parsley and minty mentuccia.

Trying for a genuine sense of place — ever more elusive in these days of global homogenization — I seek out restaurants featuring traditional dishes and am therefore as unlikely to order artichokes alla Romana in Kiev as to try chicken Kiev in Rome. But it is in markets and shops that I discover most about local food and manners, scouting regional products to look for on menus. Even more intriguing is the tense interaction of vendors and buyers bustling through daily routines, exhibiting manners and mores, trusting or not, bargaining or not, according to local custom.

For enticing displays of both food and folkways, there is no better market in Rome than the [Campo dei Fiori](#) right in the heart of the city. A veritable stage set of an antique marketplace, facing the 16th-century [Palazzo Farnese](#) and bordered by romantically faded buildings, cafes and restaurants, it comes to life every morning (except Sunday) until 1:30 p.m. The site of public executions during the Renaissance, it is now dedicated to far more felicitous pursuits.

Vegetable and fruit stalls are gardens of temptations, the heavenly artichokes still on long, leafy stems, and in season there is the particularly Roman puntarelle, a tangy salad green with long, jagged leaves, and the tiny sweet strawberries — fragoline di Nemi — that grow wild in the Castelli hills of Lazio, Rome's province. Usually there is broccolo Romano, a spring green cross between cauliflower and broccoli in pyramid-shaped heads formed of tiny shell-like nodules.

Last fall, I learned more about it in the home kitchen of Paola di Mauro, the culinary doyenne of a wine-producing restaurant family. She has informed the work of many Italian-American chefs including Mario Batali. Among other bracing Roman dishes, she prepared a lovely soup of that broccoli, based on a soffritto, a sautéed, minced blend of guanciale, garlic and parsley, and served it with thread-thin vermicelli and grated pecorino.

Fresh mushrooms prevail at some stands in the Campo dei Fiori, while the ancient-looking dried versions are in stock at others. At least six sizes and shapes of zucchini, crimson tomatoes and peppers, garlands of garlic and giant bouquets of parsley and rosemary take center stage, while around the edges open shop stands offer flowers, meats, poultry, cheeses and breads, all noisily hawked by vendors to every passer-by. Each time I return to this market, I am most surprised by the aromas. As beautiful as New York's Greenmarkets are, rarely do apples, pears, grapes, strawberries and, I swear, artichokes exude the perfumes of those at this Roman treasure.

Similar charms abound in the less expensive, more rustic open market in Testaccio, an old district that is a place of sylvan parks and tree-shaded residential streets, but once the center for slaughterhouses and still

known as the quinto quarto, or fifth quarter, referring to the innards and trimmings butchers kept for themselves. There one finds the piled-up enticements at [Volpetti](#), a salumeria where, among the luxurious delicatessen, cheeses and candies, I first sampled corallina. It is Rome's prized fresh salami of spicy, lean pork and lard, once relegated to Easter but now available year round, thanks to refrigeration.

Romans claim two special breads — the round rosetta with a top pattern suggesting an open rose, and the crusty, oblong pane di Genzano, which comes from a town in Lazio on the slopes of a volcanic crater.

At the sparkling bread bakery and casual food shop that is Compagnia del Pane, the delicious rosetta is baked, as is a house version of the Genzano. That and other breads are the base for many sandwiches that are eaten in or taken out, along with salads, a few hot dishes and pastries including one of the best cornetti (Italian for croissant) I had in the city — sheer delight with the very hot and frothy cappuccino. About 10 or 15 minutes' walk from St. Peter's, this is just right for a restorative, inexpensive lunch.



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

The morning market at Campo dei Fiori in the heart of the city offers fresh fruits and vegetables.

Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

The author has been dining at Al Moro since she began visiting Rome in 1953.

Food is the lure, but obviously not the only reward. Typically, during a weeklong visit to Rome last fall, such quests took me and my husband, Richard Falcone, to parts of the city that we might not otherwise have visited, affording glimpses of different neighborhoods with brief stops for travel poster sights en route. Finally, because authentic Roman fare is served at all levels — from the least expensive, casual trattorias like the beguiling, young-spirited Augusto in the winding walker's paradise that is [Trastevere](#) to the stylishly urbane and clubby Al Moro, around the corner from the Trevi fountain — one can see a range of social and economic differences in service, dress and tone, as well as humble to haute renditions of traditional specialties.



Since my first visit to Rome in 1953, I have begun restaurant rounds at Al Moro, a smartly compact, sophisticated spot displaying portraits of celebrity habitués like Federico Fellini and other denizens of Cinecittà and the literary world. Despite the coolly detached management attitude that Italians describe as strafottente, and the attempt to relegate foreigners to a separate room unless they specifically ask not to be, I am instantly disarmed by the temptations presented at the entrance. In season they might include fresh porcini, the egg-shaped white ovoli funghi, white truffles from Alba, cheeses, corallina and always prosciutto

with its earthy, burnished flavor.

Oddly, waiters are friendly and accommodating, suggesting the perfect artichokes alla Romana followed by thick bucatini strands in a refined amatriciana sauce (named for Amatrice, the Lazio town of origin) with bits of guanciale, onion and tomato. Or it might be spaghetti Al Moro — we recognize it as carbonara — which according to house legend was created here after World War II to please American G.I.'s who ordered

spaghetti, bacon and eggs. More likely, it originated in the Apennines where lumbermen cooked this simple pasta over fires of wood charcoal — carbona. Consistently, Moro has also had the best spaghetti with clam sauce in the city, made with the tiny, greenish veraci clams that Romans adore, and sometimes at lunch, a coarse, garlicky cotechino sausage nested on broccoli sautéed with garlic and olive oil.

Main course winners on my last visit were the Roman roasted lamb, abbacchio with rosemary-accented potatoes, fork-tender oxtail in an airy tomato sauce, and butter-gilded sautéed sweetbreads with mushrooms. Fortunately we had just enough room for what must be the world's most scrumptious babà, the rum-soaked yeast bun, here doused with satiny zabaglione.

If Al Moro reflects exclusivity, Il Matriciano practically announces inclusiveness. Close to the [Vatican Museum](#), this is a series of modern, bright and convivial dining rooms, suggesting a big American steakhouse. About 20 to 30 percent lower in price than at Al Moro, most of the same specialties are served with dash and vigor. A house antipasto includes varieties of perfect prosciutto, cheese and tiny fried croquettes of artichokes, meatballs and the like. The Roman stracciatella soup, chicken broth frothed with beaten eggs, was light and lovely, and the thin, fresh egg noodles, tagliolini, were done alla gricia, sparsely adorned only with guanciale and cheese, minus the eggs of carbonara. Amatriciana had meatier overtones than at Moro and was well matched with short thick tubes of rigatoni.

Fried lamb's brains with zucchini could not have been more crisp or golden, nor could the big, rustic chunks of oxtail have been improved upon. Although a chocolate pie proved disappointing, it was redeemed by the irresistible millefoglie, a flaky Napoleon layered with custardy whipped cream.

Still descending in price, if neither in charm nor deliciousness, is Matricianella, a homey trattoria with outdoor tables on a narrow cobblestoned shopping street between the Piazza San Lorenzo in Lucina and Fontanella Borghese. As pleasant as sidewalk dining can be, serious feeders seem to favor the indoors. In or out, Matricianella provided the very best fried artichoke alla giudea of my visit, with just the right crackle to the outer leaves and the typical velvety softness of the heart. The same can be said for the blessedly hot carbonara with its eggs, cheese, nuggets of guanciale and needlings of black pepper. Rich tomato sauces enlivened silky tripe and, for another main course, Rome's beloved salted codfish, baccalà.

About 20 years ago I happened into Osteria dell'Angelo, then a tiny slice of a place in a quiet residential district, not far from the Vatican Museum, only to return whenever I am in Rome. Owned by the congenial Angelo Croce, a retired celebrated racecar driver, it grew into a much larger space still decked with photographs of many sports stars who have visited. Brown-paper-topped tables and a handsome stone floor retain the feeling of the tiny adjacent original, and the strictly Roman fare is listed in local dialect. Thus, the second courses appear on the menu as seconni instead of secondi, and sweets are dorci, not dolci, and nun instead of non means no.

Just as authentic are the no-frills versions of spaghetti or penne alla pajata, the innards still fresh enough to have the milk that tastes like a piquant ricotta. All the Roman pastas are generously served, if not all of them are served every day, and it would be wise to check the schedule for minestra di broccoli e arzilla, a soup of Roman broccoli in a broth of skate (arzilla) and piquant hot peppers.

Tripe, baccalà, rabbit roasted with white wine and olives, and an anchovy tart are among weekly headliners. I've never made it to dessert but welcome a few cute biscotti to accompany a final espresso. The house features the wines of the Lazio in carafes adequate for two at lunch at 3.50 euros (about \$4.25 at \$1.22 to the euro).

On mild Roman afternoon and evenings, the young and the casual gather at the trestle tables set on a tiny, antique piazzetta in Trastevere, there to feast on the savory casalinga dishes of Augusto. Inside two cozy, white rooms hung with movie memorabilia, neighbors gather to chat and feed children. Daily menus change, but you could do no better than to catch the well-soaked and snowy baccalà with tomatoes, olive oil and garlic, the tender pollo alla Romana — chunks of chicken braised with tomatoes and rosemary — any of the typical pastas and a sprightly salad of the bittersweet puntarelle or greens like chicory (cicoria) sweated with garlic in sunny Lazio olive oil.

Dispensing satisfying if not brilliant local fare to the solid bourgeois residents and market men of Testaccio since 1911, [Perilli](#) is a modestly priced period piece with white tablecloths, wine bottles and antipasto on display and romantic murals of antique Roman scenes. With old-time formality, waiters present appetizers like steamed, meat-filled zucchini and then rigatoni in a tomato and oxtail meat sauce, and for main courses, pork roasted with potatoes or tender grilled sweetbreads. The little veal roll-ups, involtini, were dry and bland, but there is more than enough here to allow one to enjoy Perilli's old-time appeal.

Three other restaurants invariably mentioned when one asks for sources of Roman specialties are worth noting, because they proved to be a mixed bag.

The most frequently named is Checchino dal 1887, a 119-year old landmark in Testaccio. Offering a fully Roman menu, this tourist-conscious establishment makes it easy for the curious but cautious to try unknown fare. However, in at least four visits, including one in November, I have found dishes such as coratella, oxtails and involtini veal rolls, as well as classic Roman pastas, to be authentic, if less than sparklingly fresh or inspired. Thorough disasters included overcooked, mushy artichokes; gray, tough veal tongue in an oily green sauce; and all desserts including very tired cheeses. Service swings from helpful to borderline brusque toward non-Italians.

A spectacular artichoke dish is the only reason to visit [Evangelista](#), an old-timer done up as a smartly modern boîte. Most of the food we tried was lackluster, but the amazing house specialty, carciofi al mattone, makes this a must stop for aficionados of that thistle. Appearing as a bronze, crepelike disk, this riff on the artichoke alla giudea is made by frying the fully opened artichoke under a weight — traditionally a brick, or mattone — so that it emerges crackling crisp outside, yet meltingly tender within. That, plus a pasta like pappardelle with porcini and a glass of wine would make a satisfying lunch before a walk through the nearby Ghetto or along the Tiber.

Sora Lella is the sort of trattoria I would love to love, a charming old house on the Isola Tiberina, an island between Trastevere and the Ghetto that is also home to a centuries-old hospital and two churches. Despite the trattoria's views of the Tiber and its thoroughly Roman menu, every dish seemed stalely reheated and bland. Too bad, because it was the only place that featured the centuries-old recipe for cinghiale agrodolce — wild boar in a bittersweet sauce. The pork substituted for the boar would have been acceptable had it not been gray and dry and the sauce achingly sweet.

As much as possible we tried to sample the wines of Lazio, and found they had come a long way since the days when they were noted only for the whites of Frascati and Montefiascone. We had a pretrip sampling in New York last fall during a Roman food and wine week held at several restaurants like San Domenico and Union Square Cafe where, as red wine devotees, we favored the clear and sprightly I Quattro Mori from Castel de Paolis 2001 and the richer, more complex Racemo rosso l'Olivella 2000.

At Il Matriciano we found a robustly fruity, garnet-colored shiraz from Casale del Giglio for about \$26. That same producer also accounted for the best white we tried, a fresh but mellow-edged Satrico chardonnay from Frascati. The tasting in New York was organized by Ian D'Agata, director of the International Wine Academy of Roma, a stunning multistoried installation in a 19th-century town palace beside the [Spanish Steps](#). There one can have tastings of Lazio wines, among others, giving good reason to raise the Italian toast "A cent'anni" — "To a hundred years" — most suitable in this ancient city.

Soup to Biscotti

The country-city code is 39-06.

MARKETS AND SHOPS

Campo dei Fiori, Piazza Campo dei Fiori. Morning market until 1:30 p.m. every day except Sunday.

Compagnia del Pane, Via Fabio Massimo, 87a-89, 324-1605.

Gastronomia Volpetti, Via Marmorata, 47, Testaccio, 574-2352; www.volpetti.com.

ESPRESSO AND WINE BARS

Il Palazzetto, International Wine Academy of [Rome](#), Vicolo del Bottino, 8, 699-0878; online at www.wineacademyroma.com.

Sant'Eustachio, Piazza Sant'Eustachio, 82, 688-02048.

RESTAURANTS

Prices include lunch or dinner with tip (service) but without wine.

Osteria dell'Angelo, Via G. Bettolo, 24, 372-9470. Lunch for two, about 40 euros, or \$49 at \$1.22 to the euro.

Augusto, Piazza de Renzi, 15, Trastevere, 80-3798. Lunch for two, about 28 euros.

Cecchino dal 1887, Via Monte Testaccio, 30, 574-3816. Dinner for two, 90 euros.

Evangelista, Via della Zoccollette, 11/A, 687-5810. Dinner, 90 euros.

Matricianella, Via del Leone 2-4, 687-2100. Lunch, 70 euros.

Il Matriciano, Via dei Gracchi, 55, 321-3040. Dinner, 80 euros.

Al Moro, Vicolo delle Bollette, 13, 678-3495. Dinner, 100 euros.

Perilli a Testaccio, Via Marmorata, 39, 574-2415. Lunch, 70 euros.