

Why Your Favorite “Italian” Food Might Not Be Served in Italy

By Gunnar Lundberg



There are a few subtle differences when it comes to authentic Italian food and the more familiar American-Italian foods. For starters, in Italy you won't find any cheesy garlic bread or bottomless breadsticks as starters, but rather usually only a sliced baguette with some balsamic vinegar and olive oil for dipping. In fact, there are many dishes that most Americans think are “authentically Italian,” but in reality don't even exist there.

The most famous Italian dish is arguably spaghetti and meatballs. However, that staple would appall nearly every Italian nonna who takes pride in her culinary heritage. Although both of these dishes are often served by themselves, the combination of the two is blasphemous in the

canon of traditional Italian cooking. Meatballs are served as a singular dish, and most certainly not as a topping for pasta!

Another large difference is the notable lack of anything alfredo flavored. I can't even tell you how many times I've heard people say, "I can't wait to go to Italy and gorge myself on chicken Alfredo— it's my absolute favorite food!" I never have the heart to tell them that alfredo is a completely American invention, and no such equivalent exists anywhere in Italy.

At this point you're probably feeling slightly disappointed that Italy doesn't seem to have any of your favorite dishes, but fear not! Italy may not have too many familiar dishes, but their food is of course still amazing! Personally, I ate one of my favorite dishes of all time for the first time in Italy— and that dish is carbonara.

Traditional carbonara is a delicious pasta concoction of egg, cheese, pancetta (basically fancy bacon), and ground black pepper. This delectable four-ingredient pasta may sound simple, but in reality many chefs will spend years crafting the dish to perfection.

It should also be noted that carbonara, or a variation of it at least, does exist in America. Although the carbonara found west of the Atlantic is anything but traditional. The dish is often loaded with additions of garlic, mushrooms, peas, and plenty of heavy cream.

Although the American-style dish is tasty in its own way, I believe that the Italian concept is a little better. It revolves around simplicity in composition, but expertise in preparation. The chefs have far fewer ingredients to hide behind, so the success of the dish rests squarely on searing the pancetta to perfection, boiling the pasta to be al-dente, and adding the egg sauce at exactly the right time. I grew to love carbonara so much that I actually took a train to Milan for the sole purpose of attending a "Carbonara Street Festival," and oh was it worth it.

The festival allowed patrons to purchase a 10 Euro ticket (about \$12), and then follow a bowl of carbonara from preparation, to cooking, and ultimately to eating! You watched chefs boil the pasta, sear the pancetta, prepare the eggs, and then mix it all together in a gigantic pot. After letting the flavors bind together, the bowls were then portioned and you were able to add your own cheese and ground pepper to top-off the dish. The festival gave me the unique opportunity to follow the construction of the dish, and through that I found a new-found respect for the multitude of steps that go into making one of my favorite foods. I waddled back to the trains station stuffed, grateful, and ready for the food-coma nap that accompanies any hearty feast.

Carbonara, and it's differing forms across the world, is just one example of how a dish can change or evolve as it spreads to restaurants across the globe. Although new flairs and ingredients are added to appeal to different audiences, I'd never recommend passing up an opportunity to try the authentic version of a food.

To sum it all up— don't go to Italy expecting to find your local Italian restaurant's chicken alfredo, bottomless breadsticks, spaghetti & meatballs, or cream-filled carbonara. Because for better or for worse, those "Italian" dishes aren't actually served in Italy. And to put it another way— be sure not to take your local Italian restaurant's menu for granted— their signature dishes that you know and love have likely taken years of tweaking to get where they are today.