

Six rarely ordered items to try at an Italian restaurant

In the first article of this series, we talked about Chinese cuisine. In this one, we'll talk about perhaps the most popular cuisine on earth: Italian.

Unless you grew up in an Italian or Sicilian household a typical American's experience of those cuisines rarely goes past things like pizza, lasagna, spaghetti, ravioli, calzone or bruschetta. Even with dessert, not much is known beyond the big "four" of tiramisu, cannoli, biscotti, and gelato. But there are hundreds of dishes that most Americans haven't tried and if we go regional,

Think about this: if Americans have made those things a part of their lives and in some cases are very passionate about it, what else in Italian and Sicilian cuisine are they missing out on? If those things are so delicious and mouth-watering and only known through popularity, you would do yourself a disservice to not investigate to discover dishes that are just as delicious if not more so.

Italian and Sicilian food has an astounding regional variety and even among nationals, there is an unawareness of dishes. For example, while we in Massachusetts consider cherrystones, coffee milk, and linguica as common as water, there are swaths of America that haven't a clue what they are.



Having grown up in a Sicilian household I've eaten a large number of dishes that my Portuguese, French-Canadian, African-American, Hispanic friends in the community thought were exotic or even downright strange. This is the case for all ethnicities when it comes to their food – what is ubiquitous, normal and every day for one is brand new for another ethnic group.

I don't know about you, but as a hardcore foodie, I actually get excited when I have the opportunity to try food I've never heard of. I have a bucket list of foods that I have heard of but haven't tried yet, e.g. durian, balut, shark fin soup, bird's nest soup, Hákarl, Casu Marzu, et al. and I'd love to check off as many as I can before I die.

Anyhow, blah, blah, blah. Let's talk food.



Arancini with peas, ground beef, tomato. Photo by Catfisheye.

1. Arancini

For those who are only a little adventurous and need some coaxing to try something beyond the standard Italian dishes *Arancini* is probably the best to start with. There's nothing out of the ordinary about it to scare anyone away. *Arancini* is a Sicilian classic that has been mentioned as far back as the 10th century.

Simply put they are rice balls rolled in bread crumbs with various centers that alternate with mozzarella, sausage or ground beef and tomato sauce, or even peas and tomato sauce. They are then deep-fried until golden brown – crispy on the outside, piping hot on the inside. Serve with some dipping red sauce and you have a great appetizer or starter.

In Italy, they are popular street food and you can find vendors selling large versions placed in a protective cardboard or dense paper envelope so you can walk around enjoying the vistas while chomping on one of Italy's most delicious foods.



2. Cacio e Pepe

If you take a close look at Italian food it is typically a few main ingredients, using the freshest possible ones, and using perfect portions cooked for an exact length of time. Spaghetti Bolognese is as simple as it gets, but guess what? Ask 10 people to cook it and you taste some awful versions and some mind-blowing versions. The difference? The afore-mentioned freshness of ingredients and cooking it just right.

The problem with this is that if you don't have a lot of experience making the dish, the tiniest mistake will make the difference between bad and great. That's a dish with core three ingredients.

With *Cacio e Pepe* this theme is brought to an extreme level. Often, *Cacio e Pepe* is a benchmark for a chef demonstrating what can be done with a few ingredients. Mess up one step, one ingredient, cook it a few seconds too long or short and it will be forgettable. Do it all right and your face will light up and your belly will sing with joy.

Ready for the ingredients on this one? Un-sauced spaghetti, parmesan, fresh ground black pepper, and butter or extra virgin olive oil. Are you laughing? I hope so because I want

you to scoff at the concept of this dish being incredible. I want you to make fun of me as some rube. Then I want you to order it at a restaurant and when you get it at the right place you will think about this article and thing “That Joe was right! He’s still a stupid rube, but he was right!”

Doubt me? Ask yourself how many bad pizzas you’ve had? How many amazing ones? Even with just cheese pizza, the difference between 2 places on the same street can be night and day, right?

3. Osso Buco



If you are a meat lover, especially when it comes to beef and/or steak this is about as *umami* or savory a dish you will find in any cuisine. *Osso Buco* is on any serious foodies’ bucket list of “must try” dishes. *Osso Buco* is cross-cut veal shanks braised in white wine and natural *au jus* style broth accompanied with cubed potatoes, carrots, celery, parsley, and garlic. You may find some variations that throw in tomatoes and/or onion.

The key here is the temperature and time the dish spends braising. When done right the meat can be attacked using a fork, no knife is needed. Because it is cooked with bone in the shank the richness that comes from that bone and the marrow raises *Ossobuco* to another level. A life-changing level. I kid, I kid. Ok, I'm not kidding.

4. Caponata



Meat not your thing or looking to take a break and get some vegetables? another Sicilian classic, *Caponata*, will right up your alley. Like red sauce, you will find minor variations from town to town, even household to household with each claiming their version to be the best.

Caponata is a slightly sweet, slightly sour eggplant based salad. Married with the fried or grilled eggplant are olives, tomato, onion, capers, celery, raisins, basil and pine nuts. A kiss of honey, perhaps some red pepper flakes and you have a bowl of happy. You can find variations on some menus that have anchovies to add an element of richness. If you are a vegetarian or vegan, just be aware of that.

This *insalata* is one of that I love so much that I make it at home. Of all the dishes on this list, this is one that you allows some leeway – you can make some minor mistakes and it will still come out good. Give it a go and let us know how you make out in the comments.

5. Gnocchi



Gnocchi or “knots on wood” is one that sort of snuck on the list. I have come across a few people, even stubborn ones who prefer that hot dog, pizza, hamburger life, that have heard of *gnocchi*. Although, trying it is another thing.

Gnocchi is another dish I make at home, both potato and semolina/pasta versions. In essence, they are small love lumps or tiny dumplings made from the aforementioned pasta or potato but can be also made with egg, cheese, cornmeal or even breadcrumbs.

It is incredibly versatile because the *gnocchi* itself is there to supply texture to the dish and to sponge up the sauce you

accompany it with. For that reason substitute soups that call for pasta with *gnocchi*. The sauce can be simple alfredo, a red sauce, a bolognese, some freshly grated parmesan, or even used to make *cacio e pepe*.

They are so popular that you can find variants in French, Croatian, Austrian, Polish, Brazilian, Argentinian, even Portuguese cuisines. For the curious, in Portugal they are called *nhoque*.

6. Saltimbocca



Last but not least is one that even those who are about the hot dog, hamburger, steak and potatoes life may have heard of or tried because it is, in essence, steak. *Saltimbocca* means “jumps in the mouth” because it is so incredibly life-altering delicious that you will go into auto-pilot when eating it. Have you ever gone out with friends who talk a lot and food comes to the table that is so delicious that suddenly everyone is quiet? Yes, that’s *saltimbocca*.

Ready for some taste buds to fire up? *Saltimbocca* is pan-

fried, thinly sliced veal lined or wrapped with *prosciutto* and sage; marinated in dry white wine, olive oil or saltwater. Veal on its own is delicious, *prosciutto* on its own is delicious, wine on its own is delicious, so hey why not put them all together?

It is not uncommon to come across versions that utilize steak or chicken instead and if you are squeamish about using veal because you can look for this version or even ask a waiter if you can substitute it.

So, head out into the world foodie explorers and the next time you eat at an Italian restaurant and want to try something new or are feeling adventurous try one of these dishes.

If you end up finding something you really like, then let us know in the comments. If you don't like it at all and you are now mad at me, let me have it in the comments. Let us know where you had and what you took issue with or really enjoyed about the dish.