

ROME, *dish* by DISH

The Eternal City has produced some of Italy's classic dishes – carbonara, pizza al taglio, Amatriciana – oft imitated, rarely perfected. *Katie Parla* takes us on a tour of the plates of her adopted city.

PHOTOGRAPHY KRISTINA GILL



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CAFFÈ E CUCINA

Sciaccia's superior coffee granita. Opposite: spaghetti alla carbonara as it should be, at Pippo al Rex.



Naples is synonymous with pizza and Bologna has its famous ragù. Though all roads lead to Rome, the capital's classic dishes are less famous and, for those unfamiliar with the city and *la cucina Romana*, the best renditions are hard to find. There are hundreds of restaurants with highly traditional menus, but few push these dishes beyond the banal, and even fewer pull them off flawlessly and consistently. Finding the best has been a personal mission during 11 years in Rome, and some of my best memories are *a tavola*: spaghetti alla carbonara at Michelin-starred Pipero al Rex on the Viminal Hill; the gnocchi all'Amatriciana at L'Arcangelo near the Vatican; the finger-licking coda alla vaccinara at Cesare al Casaletto. Here's my short list of Rome's finest dishes, prepared with care and respect for tradition.



CACIO E PEPE

Roscioli

When Alessandro Roscioli opened his eponymous delicatessen and restaurant barely 50 metres from his father's historic bakery, he immediately earned a reputation as a premier purveyor of ingredients. Cured meats and cheeses greet the visitor at the display cases near the front of the establishment, where a handful of tables crowd the entrance. Book a table towards the back or in the cellar and delve deep into the deli menu before moving on to tonnarelli cacio e pepe, one of the house's handful of signature pasta dishes. The basic tonnarelli cacio e pepe is simple: grated Pecorino Romano tossed with black pepper and strands of egg pasta. But at Roscioli, chef Nabil Hadj Hassen makes his version with aged ewe's milk cheeses from three regions – Pecorino Romano DOP from near Rome, a hard cheese from Moliterno in Basilicata and a cave-aged variety, Pecorino di Fossa, from Sogliano al Rubicone in Emilia-Romagna – blended with ground black pepper from Malaysia. The result is creamy, piquant and pungent and more complex than the single-origin versions of cacio e pepe served by the neighbours.

+ Roscioli, Via dei Giubbonari 21, +39 06 687 5287, salumeriaroscioli.com

CARCIOFI ALLA GIUDIA

Piperno

From February until May the carciofo Romanesco, the local globe artichoke, is served carpaccio-style, marinated, braised, sautéed or fried in restaurants all over town. The greatest incarnation of this seasonal ingredient is carciofi alla Judia, Jewish-style artichokes. During the more than 300-year-long ghetto period, Roman Jews were confined to a squalid,



fire-prone neighbourhood where street-food stalls were substitutes for home kitchens, turning out rough-and-ready meals from their bubbling cauldrons of oil. Artichokes would be stripped of their tough outer leaves, then cooked in oil, rendering the outside crisp and the hearts sweet and tender. The ghetto buildings and its street-food stalls are long gone, but many restaurants in the area serve Roman Jewish specialties. Sadly, they're often mediocre, using the cheaper, spine-filled French artichokes instead of the local variety. A standout exception, Piperno, serves meticulously prepared and properly cooked carciofi alla Romana, along with other deep-fried vegetables, in a posh setting just metres from the streets of the recipe's humble origins.

+ Piperno, Via Monte de' Cenci 9, +39 06 6880 6629, ristorantepiperno.com

CODA ALLA VACCINARA

Cesare al Casaletto

Named for the *vaccinari* (the old Roman word for butchers) who once worked in Rome's historical centre, this oxtail braise is among the city's best-known dishes. It reaches its full flavour at Cesare al Casaletto, where chef and sommelier Leonardo Vignoli simmers segments of tail in a tomato-based sauce enriched with liberal amounts of onion, carrot and celery. The oxtail is simmered for hours, infusing the intense sauce with meaty juices and rendering the fat and flesh succulent and tender. Aesthetically, coda alla vaccinara may be wanting – the plate arrives at the table with three pieces of oxtail sitting in an unlovely-looking pool of sauce – but the beauty of Vignoli's version of the dish is fully revealed once you grab a segment with both hands and manoeuvre the bone until its succulent meaty bits have been liberated.

+ Cesare al Casaletto, Via del Casaletto 45, +39 06 536 015



GRANITA DI CAFFÈ

Sciascia Caffè

Prati, the patrician neighbourhood north-east of the Vatican, has its share of old-school coffee shops, but Sciascia, which was established by a Sicilian family in 1919, is its most historic. It's also one of the few places in town that roasts its own beans, creating a fresher, superior final product. Pay at the till near the entrance, then take the receipt to the bar in the back and place your order. There, locals sip espresso while standing up or linger over cappuccino at the few tables.

The institution's skilled baristas work magic with their traditional machines, which produce an intense and aromatic coffee. In the warmer months, Sciascia transforms this hot drink into an icy granita di caffè. Espresso is mixed with a sugar syrup, then partially frozen and stirred until a slushy consistency is achieved. This summertime specialty of southern Italian origins has been fully adopted by Romans, who order their granite di caffè with a dollop of barely sweetened whipped cream.

+ Sciascia, Via Fabio Massimo 80a, +39 06 321 1580, sciascia1919.com

CARBONARA & CO

Carbonara at Pipero al Rex

Amatriciana at L'Arcangelo

Gricia at Armando al Pantheon

The holy trinity of Roman pasta dishes – gricia, Amatriciana and carbonara – reveals the relative simplicity of Roman cuisine. They share most of the same ingredients, with slight variations that result in significant differences in texture and flavour.

Though Amatriciana and carbonara pasta dishes enjoy greater name recognition, it is actually gricia, a sauce made from guanciale, cured pork jowl, its



HISTORIC PRESENT

Above, from top left: Piperno in the former Jewish ghetto and its carciofi alla Judia; coda alla vaccinara at Cesare al Casaletto (below). Opposite: cacio e pepe at Roscioli.



rendered fat, grated Pecorino Romano and black pepper, that forms the basis of Rome's principal pasta courses. Add tomato to the gricia recipe and you've got Amatriciana. Add egg instead and it's carbonara.

Being so simple, gricia has the most room for error and demands the use of high-quality ingredients. It's at its most satisfying at Armando al Pantheon, where chef Claudio Gargioli learned the recipe from his father, Armando. For more than four decades, Armando al Pantheon has been serving rich and viscous spaghetti alla gricia in a family atmosphere. Gargioli's version is both elegant and homey, with delicately balanced flavour clinging to each pasta strand. The quality of ingredients, which are much higher than those employed by most, makes this an outstanding version of Rome's simplest pasta dish.

Across the Tiber in Prati, Arcangelo Dandini of L'Arcangelo uses tomatoes sparingly in his Amatriciana sauce. This locally cultivated produce brings sweetness and acidity to the sauce, which is subtly amplified with his pasta pairing of choice, potato gnocchi. Though

The *holy trinity of Roman pasta* dishes – gricia, Amatriciana and carbonara – reveals the relative simplicity of Roman cuisine.

Amatriciana is traditionally served with bucatini, Dandini dismisses the rigid pairing. Each bowl is studded with slivers of cured pork jowl, which mingle with the light and pillowy gnocchi – a perfect marriage of starch, tomato and cured jowl in a supremely light dish that elsewhere can feel heavy and oily.

Likewise, chef Luciano Monosilio at the Michelin-starred Pipero al Rex renders a potentially heavy dish light. His spaghetti alla carbonara is undoubtedly rich, employing only the egg yolk, with no white. But it practically defies the physics of its quality components by remaining light on the palate. The brilliantly yellow sauce clings to strands of al dente spaghetti, which catch the crisp guanciale cubes. Monosilio's version of this Roman classic certainly contrasts with the hyper-modern dishes that populate most of the menu, but one can hardly imagine Pipero's table without it.

+ Armando al Pantheon, Salita dei Crescenzi 31, +39 06 6880 3034, armandoalpantheon.it
+ L'Arcangelo, Via Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli 59, +39 06 321 0992, ristorantelarcangelo.com
+ Pipero al Rex, Via Torino 149, +39 06 481 5702, alessandropipero.com

PIZZA ROMANA

Da Remo

In the Testaccio district's main square, Da Remo serves typical Roman-style pizza: wood-fired and wafer-thin. In a finely tuned nightly routine, Da Remo's *pizzaioli* stretch and form their dough into large discs, the dimensions of which exceed the boundaries of their plates. The crisp pizzas are topped with simple combinations that don't stress the fragile bases. Pairings



such as mushroom and sausage, mozzarella and tomato, and zucchini flowers with anchovies are best, and served by efficient, flirtatious staff who whiz through the dining rooms delivering personal pizza to seated guests.

+ Da Remo, Piazza di Santa Maria Liberatrice 44, +39 06 574 6270

PIZZA AL TAGLIO

Pizzarium

When Gabriele Bonci dreamt of opening his own restaurant in 2003, the price of commercial rents scuppered his plans. As a compromise, he opened a 30-square-metre pizza-by-the-slice shop, which marries his passions for bread baking and cooking. Unlike round, crisp pizza Romana, pizza al taglio is a long flatbread topped and cut to the customer's preferred dimensions. Pizza Romana is eaten while sitting down at a pizzeria, whereas pizza al taglio is eaten on the fly, often standing up. Bonci never did open that restaurant, preferring to perfect his long-leavened dough recipe, which forms the base for both classic and creative toppings. His decade-old takeaway is now an institution and Bonci is an international celebrity, a status achieved through a slavish devotion to quality ingredients and organic stone-ground heirloom wheat, an approach to sourcing that is unrivalled in Rome. Most toppings change according to the season, but pizza con le patate (with potatoes and mozzarella) is produced daily. Other offerings range from roast fig and pecorino to salt cod with pine nuts and raisins, and virtually every imaginable combination of Italian produce and protein.

+ Pizzarium, Via della Meloria 43, +39 06 3974 5416



A TAVOLA

Above: pizza at Da Remo. Opposite, clockwise from top left: spaghetti alla carbonara at Pipero al Rex; L'Arcangelo; spaghetti alla gricia at Armando al Pantheon; L'Arcangelo's gnocchi all'Amatriciana.



TRAPIZZINI

Trapizzino

This tiny shop in the heart of Testaccio is the source of the trapizzino, a significant street-food innovation. Invented by owner Stefano Callegari in 2008, this triangular slice of fluffy, long-leavened bread is sliced open, toasted and filled with a variety of sauces and mains borrowed from the Roman culinary canon. This hand-held snack immediately gained a cult following for its rich flavours and approachable prices. Some fillings change with the season, but others, such as trapizzino alla picchiapo' (beef braised with tomato and onions), are available year-round. The tender meat is spooned into the bread triangle for a portable and economical snack.

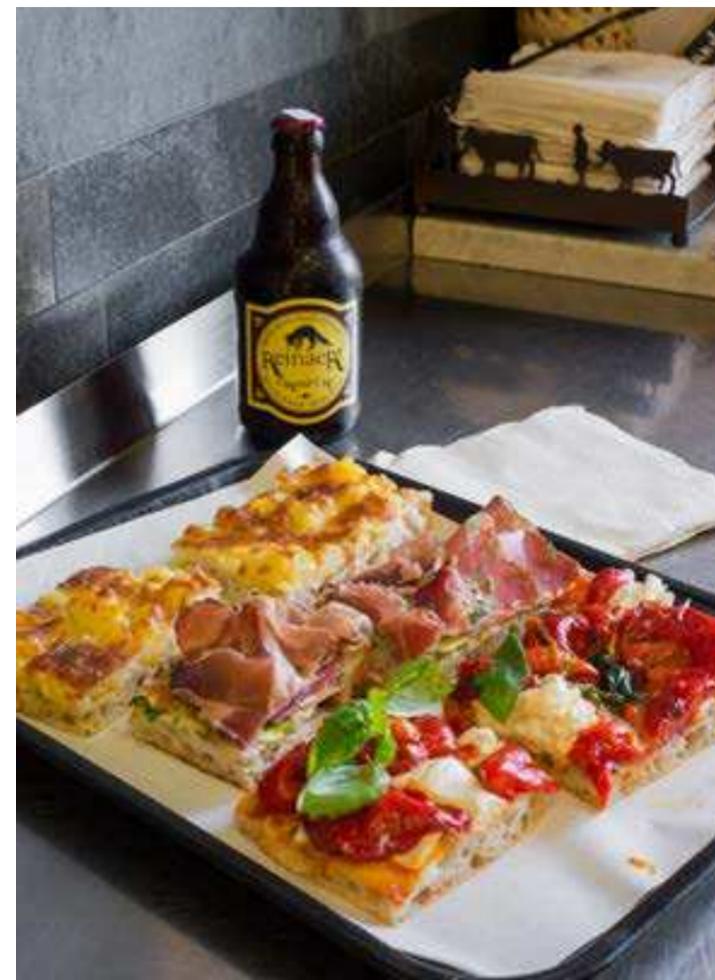
+ Trapizzino, Via Giovanni Branca 88, +39 06 4341 9624, 00100pizza.com

TRIPPA ALLA ROMANA

Flavio al Velavevodetto

Trippa alla Romana, Roman-style tripe, is the labour-intensive preparation of veal or beef tripe in which strips are cooked with onion, carrot, celery, local mint, white wine and tomato. Once plated, trippa alla Romana is dusted with finely grated Pecorino Romano, adding a savoury note to the subtly sweet tomato sauce. At Flavio al Velavevodetto, chef Flavio De Maio prepares and serves this dish a few hundred metres from Rome's retired slaughterhouse. The restaurant itself is built into the ruins of Monte di Testaccio, a large heap of ancient terracotta vessels, and a historic destination for offal-based dishes. De Maio's tender and slippery trippa alla Romana carries the constant threat of tomato splatter, so follow the local custom and devote one hand to your fork and the other to pressing a linen napkin against your chest for protection. Then sink your teeth into Rome's most tender version of its famed offal dish.

+ Flavio al Velavevodetto, Via di Monte Testaccio 97, +39 06 574 4194, flavioalvelavevodetto.it



Devote one *hand to your fork* and the other to pressing a linen napkin against your chest.

PORCHETTA ON PIZZA BIANCA

Panificio Bonci

A short walk from Pizzarium, Gabriele Bonci's newest venture, Panificio Bonci, serves a range of quality breads and other baked goods, as well as prepared foods and a limited selection of sandwiches. But perhaps the most appealing item in the shop is Vitaliano Bernabei's porchetta. Bernabei is one of the few specialist pork butchers in the region who is still dedicated to artisanal production and he prepares porchetta at his shop in Marino, a village south-east of Rome, and personally delivers it to Panificio Bonci three times a week. To achieve porky perfection, Bernabei bones the animal, seasons the meat with sea salt, black pepper, chilli, fennel pollen and rosemary, binds it tight, and cooks it for about seven hours at 90 degrees. The final product is savoury, succulent, marbled meat sheathed in a crisp, fatty crust. Order slices of Bernabei's porchetta on Bonci's pizza bianca and be sure they throw in a few cracklings, too.

+ Panificio Bonci, Via Trionfale 34/36, +39 06 3973 4457

TRUE ROMAN

Top left: Panificio Bonci's prima porchetta. Above left: pizza al taglio at Pizzarium. Above right: Flavio al Velavevodetto. Opposite, from top left: porchetta in pizza bianca at Panificio; trapizzini; Flavio's trippa alla Romana; and pizza al taglio at Pizzarium.