

by Margaret Swaine

# FABULOUS FLAVOURS OF *ROME*

TWO TASTY WALKING TOURS OF ROME WILL HAVE YOU MAPPING OUT YOUR NEXT EUROPEAN VACATION USING TBPS (TASTE BUD POSITIONING SYSTEM).

**M**any tourists get to know a city by sightseeing. I get the gist of a town through my stomach and I'm not alone. Food is now the leading hook of travel and considered a megatrend for 2016. Travel trend researchers call it The Bourdain Effect.

Whether you are sipping a pho for breakfast in Vietnam, sampling dim sum in Hong Kong or noshing on baklava in Istanbul, you are experiencing not only the taste of a place, but also part of its history. Dining as a form of live entertainment has spawned walking food tours in cities around the world. Almost all are a terrific way to both experience a city and eat your fill.

When I was recently in Rome I signed up for two food tours, because when in Rome, you eat. I picked two offered by Eating Italy: one at twilight through the Trastevere district and the other a daytime visit to Testaccio.



The evening Trastevere tour started on Tiber Island (Isola Tiberina) with an introduction from Sarah our American in Rome guide. Dressed punk style and full of life, she was an enthusiastic leader with an amplified voice to match her character.

Trastevere has been compared to Greenwich Village and the Left Bank of Paris. It's an old quartier that's very trendy now with narrow cobblestone streets, ivy coated walls and a charm that has attracted up and coming locals and foreigners to move in. Restaurants are often run by the same family for generations and come alive as the sun sets.

We started at Da Enzo al 29 owned by three brothers. Signs boasted "fava fresche" as it was fava bean season and of course there were carciofi alla giudia and Roman style. Artichokes are a beloved vegetable of Rome and are served either deep fried the Jewish way or alla Romana which is simply boiled with herbs. Both are divinely satisfying.

We also had another Roman favourite, straciatella made with mozzarella curds, heavy cream and salt, like the centre of burrata. Burrata is mozzarella formed into a hollow pouch, which is then filled with fresh cream and soft stringy bits of curd, the ritagli, or rags, remaining after mozzarella making. Imagine scooping up fresh cream and soft gooey cheese with fresh cherry tomatoes and basil. Pure ecstasy.

From there we moved to Spirito di Vino, which had a 5,000 wine bottle cellar in a former synagogue. The atmospheric cellar dated to 80 BC and our guide quipped that with each step in the lengthy staircase we descended 75 years. Here as with most of the stops we had wine – this time it was from Sicily made from the Nerello Mascalese grape which flourishes on the volcanic soils of Mount Etna. Paired with the



wine was slow cooked pork stew with apples and honey. My Jewish husband suggested the rabbis must have turned in their graves.

Next stop was at the Innocenti family bakery opened in 1920 where Stefania and her team make hundreds of types of biscotti in a 1950s vintage oven. The place was boiling hot but the cookie lovers in our group didn't seem to notice nor care that dessert came in the middle of our walking 'meal'.

We continued on to L'Antica Norcineria regarded by Trasteverini as having the best porchetta in the neighbourhood. Their porchetta was a juicy, roasted and stuffed piglet with crispy skin. The owner Piero raises his own pigs in the Castello Romano area which is part of the secret. The store's Pecorino Romano cheese made from sheep's milk was also special. (We were the original Pecorino Romano is made from sheep milk from the Lazio region where Rome is situated; other versions from Sardinia are inferior.)

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We also tried young spreadable gorgonzola (who knew) and Ciu Ciu wine from the Marche winery San Carro which is a blend of predominantly barbera with sangiovese and merlot. At I Suppli we were treated to authentic Roman street food. It was a hole in the wall, of the kind I literally found all over the city. People order at a counter and eat their purchase out on the street. Suppli is a hive of activity all day long and serves up tasty suppli (deep fried Arborio rice balls filled with cheese and ground meats), takeaway pasta and old-style pizza by the slice (large slabs cooked on low-edged pans). Thought we were getting to the end? So did I but I was completely mistaken. Next came Enoteca Ferrara run by two sisters Lina and





## EATING EUROPE WAS FOUNDED IN ROME

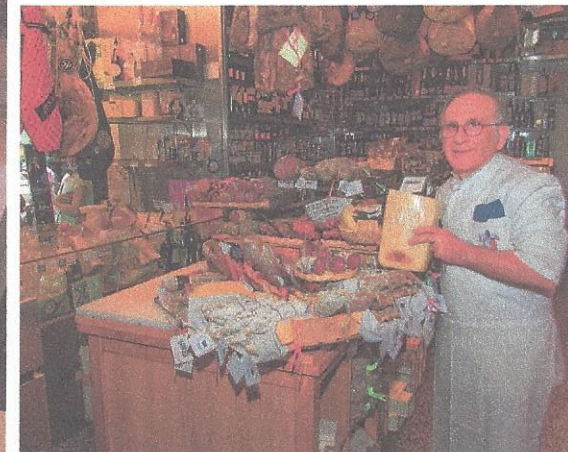
in 2011 by American native, Kenny Dunn. His informal culinary strolls with friends and family became the Taste of Testaccio Food Tour. It has since expanded with tours and cooking classes in Rome, Florence, London, Amsterdam and Prague. This July the company launched Eating Prague's first beer tour, "Brews and Views". [www.eatingeuro-petours.com](http://www.eatingeuro-petours.com) My Roman adventures were booked through their specific Italian website [www.eatingitalyfoodtours.com](http://www.eatingitalyfoodtours.com). Tours are approximately 4hrs long and include 8-12 tastings, depending on tour. Cost is around Cnd \$120 per person (quoted in Euros).

In Berlin I booked through [www.eat-the-world.com](http://www.eat-the-world.com), an apt description for the food tour I took in the Kreuzberg area. This company was founded in 2008 by Elke Freimuth with the goal of giving customers a tasty, non-touristy insight into the neighbourhoods of key German cities. She offers tours in 26 German cities now.

In Vancouver, Victoria and Banff I've booked through <http://offtheeatentrack-tours.ca> which features everything tasty from local butcher shops to high-end restaurants. I've had fun in Calgary with [www.calgaryfoodtours.com](http://www.calgaryfoodtours.com) and in Montreal with [www.montrealfoodtours.com](http://www.montrealfoodtours.com). In Toronto I've had delish tours with [www.culinaryadventureco.com](http://www.culinaryadventureco.com).

I never would have dared eat Mexican street food in Puerto Vallarta if it wasn't for the guidance of [www.vallartafoodtours.com](http://www.vallartafoodtours.com).

Google "food tours" and the city that interests you and you will likely find a way to eat about town.



We were instructed not to go for bright coloured gelato as it's undoubtedly a food-dye fake. (For example pistachio is naturally a dull green not a florescent one.) Fluffed up gelato looks pretty but is full of air. And too many flavour choices means the gelateria is not likely to be using fresh seasonal ingredients but rather powders and formulas. Fatamorgana was the real thing. Colours were dull but flavours were bright, pure and limited. No fluff.

Maria - a chef and sommelier duo. We had three pastas here: ricotta and spinach ravioli topped with tomato sauce; tonarelli cacio e pepe which is a classic roman dish of black pepper, Pecorino Romano cheese and pasta that uses some of the hot pasta water for moisture; and Trofie al Pesto a Liguria pasta made with flour and water, no eggs. This was washed down with free flowing wine.

Finally we were at the dessert stage at the doorstep of Fatamorgana, a gelato place. We learned that there are over 15,000 gelateria in Italy and about 1,500 in Rome. From there the lecture began.

My second Roman food tour to the Testaccio district during daytime had somewhat less drinking balanced by even more history. Located between the Tiber River and the Aurelian Walls, this former working class area maintains to this day its authentic Roman spirit and close connection to food.

Their Emporium (square dedicated to the sale of food) was once where at least 90% of all produce was imported into Rome. At the time they used amphora (clay pots) to contain liquids and the simple disposal method for the vessels was to break the amphora into pieces. Today





*“That mountain of clay trash that spans a city block, has restaurants dug into it.”*

there is a mountain of terracotta amphora fragments, the 45-metre-tall Mount Testaccio, beside the former Emporium.

That mountain of clay trash that spans a city block, has restaurants dug into it. On my tour we stopped for pasta at one, Flavio al Velavevodetto, where we were served the hat trick of classic Roman pasta: amatriciana (guanciale – i.e. cured pork cheek, Pecorino and tomato), carbonara (guanciale, egg and Parmesan cheese or aged Pecorino) and cacio e pepe.

This eating tour had some unusual stops. One was to the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome. Near to Porta San Paolo, its backdrop is part of the Aurelian Walls and the Pyramid of Cestius, a unique monument dating to approximately 12 B.C. English poets John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, the son of Goethe, Antonio Gramsci (the Italian political philosopher) and the Russian painter Karl Bryullov are all buried here.

The visit was helpful to walk off what we had been consuming on the tour. We had pizza margherita by the slice (al taglio) at Volpetti Più, 24 month old Parmigiano-Reggiano, truffled pecorino and salami served with Barolo wine at Volpetti and incredible pastries and chocolates at Barberini.

The Romans often make a breakfast of cornetto and coffee. A cornetto “little horn” is a melt-in-your-mouth croissant-like flaky pastry which can be stuffed as in cornetto alla crema (with custard), alla marmellata (with jam or marmalade), al miele (with honey) or al cioccolato (with Nutella). Barberini’s are as sinfully delicious as you might imagine.

After the cemetery we went to the new Testaccio Market. The old market was a collection of shacks in Testaccio Square (the

former Emporium) but moved in 2012 to a spanking new building that’s clean and sanitized. What it lacks in atmosphere is made up for by the vendors (most who moved over from the old place). Most often a stall is manned by the same family for generations and they are experts in what they sell.

We tried bombetta (baked pork neck with pecorino cheese) and craft beer at Food Box which specializes in the street food of Puglia. We picked up a caprese salad of buffalo mozzarella with tomatoes and basil, and bruschetta of raw garlic rubbed over a bread slice, doused with olive oil and topped with fresh tomato and basil.

We went on to sample supplì, the traditional Roman snack food, at Trapizzino and ended with gelato at Giolitti which has been serving the neighbourhood great iced desserts since 1914.

In between we stopped at a nasione. In 98 AD the roman consul was first termed as guardian of the city’s water supply and from then on providing water to its people has been part of Rome’s job. In modern day Rome you can find around 2,500 public fountains which are called nasoni (big noses). These fountains contain clean water that is safe for drinking: the same water that comes out of the taps in the homes.

There’s a small hole at the top of the nose shaped spout. Plug the end of the spout with the palm of your hand and water will shoot upwards out of this hole in a perfect drinking arch.

With these walking food tours, I found so many ways to quench my thirst, my hunger and my curiosity while in Rome, and nary a tour bus in sight.