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# Christmas Countdown

FESTIVE MENUS, GIFTS, AND SEASONAL  
RECIPES TO GET YOUR HOLIDAY SORTED

# Whoot!!

Whoot! has arrived, and  
HK's dining scene just got  
more rewarding.

*Find out what all the Whoot! is about inside.*





# LIVING LA DOLCE VITA: AN ITALIAN TASTING TOUR

**Chris Dwyer** travels north to south discovering the edible delights of the different regions of Il Bel Paese

Ahhhh, bella Italia. The country where everything you eat has been lovingly handmade by an ancient, smiling nonna from the finest produce that couldn't be more local. Fresh ravioli are made with eggs from her backyard chickens, flour from the mill down the road and then they're filled with ricotta from her neighbour. Or so we'd like to think.

The truth is, of course, that nowhere - not even Italy - is immune to industrialised food and big agribusiness. But Italy does still have more than its fair share of producers and chefs, winemakers and artisans, meaning that food still underscores life in a way that most countries will never fully understand.

An early summer tour proved this point - and then some. It reminded that from the aperitivo through to a post-dessert grappa, dinner could take three, four, sometimes five hours - with almost no one looking at their phone. People would drive miles out of their way

for one ingredient. But, most of all, the impression was reinforced that eating was never about fuelling up, never about grabbing something to fill a gap - but always about pleasure in all its myriad forms.

My two-week visit crisscrossed the country from north to south, via inland mountain lakes and volcanic islands, all punctuated by simply brilliant things to eat. It all started in a village called Paganica outside the small town of L'Aquila, just 90 minutes' drive north-east of Rome. It's home to some of the world's finest saffron (zafferano) production, but we were here to see one man. Mr De Paulis is a fourth-generation prosciutto maker, known as one of Italy's very best salumi producers.

Since 1924, generations of his family have produced just 150 legs of prosciutto a year. It's so good - and sustainable - thanks to their technique of manually working the pork in ancient methods, then seasoning and letting it dry in the air of mountainous Gran Sasso. Tasting



is truly believing as the flavours sing of happy animals raised in one of Europe's most beautiful and wild regions. Don't miss the other meats, cheeses, wines and assorted produce in his tiny shop which truly makes you wish it was your local.

It's then an hour's drive through breathtaking Abruzzo to get to another tiny artisanal producer, Gregorio Rotolo, just outside the picturesque lake town of Scanno. A relative newcomer, making his cheeses for only half a century, this shepherd looks like a cross between Santa Claus and one of his elves, especially when wearing his trademark woolly hat.

He uses oak barrels from esteemed local winery Valle Reale to make cheese including pecorino, ricotta and caciocavallo barricato. Its name has an equine link because as the cheese ages and hangs, it looks like legs dangling either side of a saddle. He also makes sensational salumi from legs of sheep, flavouring them only with wild fennel, salt and pepper, explaining how in days gone by, they'd simply dry the legs in the sun.

With the ham and cheese in hand, you have the perfect excuse to take a bottle of Valle Reale's San Calisto Montepulciano D'Abruzzo (available in Hong Kong from Certa in Wanchai) and hike up into the hills behind his small workshop – where brown bears and wolves still roam – before enjoying a picnic with views that truly beat them all.

Staying in stunning Abruzzo, we head next to visit one of Italy's gastronomic superstars, the supremely talented but decidedly modest chef Niko Romito. The

former stockbroker took over his father's restaurant when he died in 1999, despite knowing nothing about cooking. Twenty years later, he holds a reputation as something of a bread genius, not to mention three Michelin stars and the #51 spot on The World's 50 Best Restaurants for his sublime restaurant Reale.

We experience his food first at ALT Stazione del Gusto, his contemporary and design-driven roadside café on the only road linking the Adriatic and The Mediterranean. This is a temple to his extraordinary signature bread and also bomba, a sensational sort of street food. In both savoury and sweet versions – such as with mozzarella and tomato or filled with fruit creams – these are basically the greatest, lightest doughnuts you'll ever eat.

Next comes his fine-dining restaurant Reale, sitting in a beautiful ancient vineyard surrounded by rose gardens and rooms where you can stay the night. It's also home to his award-winning culinary school for serious immersion in the art and science of food. Dinner left this diner almost speechless, such was the innovation, execution and complete lack of reference points to dishes I've eaten before.

A roasted tomato glazed with honey was ethereal, an ash potato reminded me of a creation at Mugaritz in the Basque Country. Most of all, his truly perfect pasta, capellini and tomato water. If it sounds simple, it couldn't be further from the truth. Hugely labour-intensive, technically brilliant, utterly delicious.

Incredible local wines were paired, notably a Vigneto di Popoli, Vendemmia 2013 and a Valle Reale San



> From left to right: Paganica prosciutto and Scannese shepherd cheese





Calisto Montepulciano D'Abruzzo. To finish a remarkable meal, a fitting dessert of licorice granita, white vinegar, white chocolate and balsamic vinegar, which took agrodolce – the southern Italian flavour profile of sweet and sour – to new heights. (Incidentally, Romito's cuisine - and his famed bread – are also served at Bulgari hotels in Beijing, Shanghai, Bali and more.)

The renaissance jewel of Florence came calling next, a city replete with legendary dishes. There were the famed tripe-filled panini called lampredotto that came with vibrant green salsa verde, the soothing soup ribollita with kale, bread and beans, or huge bistecca Fiorentina T-bone steaks.

But it was again a humble artisanal food producer who particularly entranced this visitor. Antonio Mattei have been making biscuits since 1858, before Italy as the country we know today was even founded. Their most famous creation are cantucci, made with just five ingredients: wheat flour, eggs, sugar, almonds and pine nuts.

When you visit their charming and original home in Prato, a few minutes on the train from Florence's central station, they'll even let you have a look around the fragrant workshop space, where a team of just 23 make

hundreds of kilograms a day of biscuits.

Cantucci are designed to be dipped in the honey-like vin santo to slightly soften them, but they're just as good with coffee or as an ingredient in your own creations.

There are also biscuits with chocolate chips, local Tuscan hazelnuts or pistachios, but my favourite were the brilliantly named brutti e buoni – in other words ugly-but-good, knobbly little almond-rich bites. Handily these days, Mattei sell online and deliver, but they're also available in global stores including our own Lane Crawford.

Finally, from Florence a direct flight to Sicily, a food jewel if ever there was one. Travellers have waxed lyrical for millennia about the unique culinary attractions of this spectacular island. The volcanic soil is largely responsible as it provides the perfect base for amazing local produce. From large knobbly lemons to strawberries so good they'd make you weep, grapes behind legendary wines to cheeses that truly taste of the wild, you are never going to go hungry here.

One way to truly understand this rich tapestry of produce and influences is to hit up the Anna Tasca Lanza cookery school. It sits on the beautiful Regaleali wine estate in the heartland of central Sicily, itself a unique

> From left clockwise: bomba by Niko Romito, Anna Tasca Lanza cookery school, capers, a selection of bread, Capofaro estate and caponata

terroir that contributes to stunning wines and much more.

The winemaker tells us on a tour of the property. "We're not in the south of Italy – we're in the north of Africa." This reminds us that, at its closest points, Sicily sits less than 100 miles from Tunisia.

Over glasses of Regaleali's famed Rosso del Conte, lunch at the cooking school founded by the famed food writer and activist Anna Tasca Lanza was a revelation. She sadly passed away in 2010, but her daughter Fabrizia Lanza took on running the "experiential food education" programmes that teach guests as much about farming, sustainability and culture as about food.

We started with incredible involtini of aubergine where ricotta (from sheep grazing a nearby hill) was bound into aubergine, Parmesan, tomato and oregano. Then fish with a lovely salmoriglio sauce that simply combines garlic, lemon juice, olive oil and seasoning. To finish, we ate a lemon curd with lemons from less than 50 yards away, served with "sour cherries from the trees behind you", as Fabrizia explained. As we were told later, with a smile, this food was "less 'farm to table' and more 'arm to table'."


Our final Italian stop came in the breathtaking Aeolian Islands, a short ferry ride from the Sicilian mainland. One of them is Stromboli, infamous for its volcanic activity, but our destination of Salina was 35km distant, meaning that the gently smoking giant provided jaw-dropping night-time shows.

Salina is home to the Capofaro estate, where Malvasia vines yield brilliant sweet and aromatic wines. Guests can stay in the beautiful rooms and suites, including some under the original lighthouse that gives the estate its name. Memorable meals from Chef Ludovico De Vivo start with bread voted the "best on the table in Italy" by the country's esteemed Gambero Rosso restaurant guide. He lets the produce shine, including something that grows wild across the estate and has a varietal distinct to Salina: capers.

Finishing our journey as we started, with the

finest artisanal Italian production, we drive vertiginous roads overlooking azure seas until we reach a smallholding. This is where Italy's most prized capers are found, so much so that they have been celebrated by the Slow Food movement.

These capers are still picked by hand from May to August, with elderly workers starting at 5am to beat the heat. They're then laid out to dry in cool spots and then mixed with coarse local sea salt before being cured by being transferred between different buckets and containers. In a month, they are ready and can keep for up to three years. Firm, sharp and sweet, they're perfect in a tomato sauce, with seafood or, best of all, in the Sicilian sweet-and-sour classic caponata, a vegetable dish to beat them all.

The finest imaginable produce, made with integrity, at the heart and soul of a dish? That's Italy on a plate. 

## KEY ADDRESSES:

### Paganica Prosciutto

Salumificio Ugo de Paulis, 1 Via Fioretta, 67100 Paganica

### Scannese Cheese

Bio Agriturismo Valle Scannese, 67038 Scanno  
[www.facebook.com/Bioagriturismovallescannese](http://www.facebook.com/Bioagriturismovallescannese)

### Niko Romito's ALT Stazione del Gusto

Strada Statale, 67031 Castel di Sangro  
[www.altstazionedelgusto.it](http://www.altstazionedelgusto.it)

### Niko Romito's Reale Restaurant

Piana Santa Liberata, 67031 Castel di Sangro AQ  
[www.nikoromito.com/en/reale](http://www.nikoromito.com/en/reale)

### Antonio Mattei

Via Ricasoli 20, 59100 Prato  
[www.antoniomattei.com](http://www.antoniomattei.com)

### Regaleali estate

[www.tascadalmerita.it/en/estate/regaleali](http://www.tascadalmerita.it/en/estate/regaleali)

### Anna Tasca Lanza cookery school

[www.annatascalanza.com](http://www.annatascalanza.com)

### Capofaro estate

[www.capofaro.it/en](http://www.capofaro.it/en)

### Certa wines

[www.certa.com.hk](http://www.certa.com.hk)