

What to Eat in Rome

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Cucina Romana

The food of Rome, known as *cucina romana*, is a delicious reflection of its history: simple, hearty, and built on fresh, local ingredients. Unlike the rich, complex sauces of French cuisine or the heavier, creamier dishes found in Northern Italy, Roman food is famous for its humble, straightforward approach. It often relies on a few core ingredients—sheep's cheese (*pecorino romano*), cured pork cheek (*guanciale*), black pepper, and fresh pasta—to create dishes that are unforgettable. For tourists, eating in Rome isn't just about trying the food; it's about experiencing the local culture, from the morning *cappuccino* to the anytime-of-day *gelato*.



What Defines Roman Cuisine?

Roman cooking is rooted in the tradition of *cucina povera* ("poor kitchen"). This means that traditionally, Roman cooks used inexpensive ingredients, simple grains, and local vegetables like artichokes. Today, this tradition translates into a focus on quality over complexity. Dishes are fast to prepare but deep in flavor.

Key components you'll find everywhere include:



- **Pecorino Romano:** A hard, salty cheese made from sheep's milk. It's the essential ingredient in almost all the famous Roman pasta dishes.
- **Guanciale:** Cured pork cheek, which is richer and fattier than bacon (*pancetta*). It's sliced and rendered until crispy, providing the fat base for many sauces.
- **Artichokes (*Carciofi*):** Prepared two ways: *alla romana* (braised with mint and garlic) or *alla giudia* (deep-fried until crispy, a specialty of the Jewish Ghetto).



A Day of Eating

As a tourist, knowing what to order and when will help you eat like a true Roman. Roman breakfast is quick, sweet, and typically eaten standing up at a bar counter. Forget eggs and bacon; Romans prefer a quick sugar and caffeine boost.

- **Espresso:** The vital start to the day. Don't ask for a *latte*—that just means milk! Ask for a *caffè* (an *espresso*) or a *cappuccino* (but only before 11 AM, unless you want to look like a tourist).

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- Cornetto: This is the Italian version of a croissant, but softer and sweeter. It can be plain (*vuoto*) or filled with cream (*crema*), jam (*marmellata*), or Nutella.

Lunch is a simple but satisfying affair. Many Romans have a quick sandwich or a small plate of pasta. Tourists often use lunch as the perfect time to try a Roman pizza.

- Pizza by the Slice (*pizza al taglio*): Found in bakeries (*forni*), this pizza is rectangular, baked in large trays, and sold "by the cut" (*al taglio*) based on weight. It's a great, fast, and affordable lunch.
- Sandwiches (*panini*): Prepared with local cold cuts (*salumi*), cheeses, and often *porchetta* (slow-roasted, seasoned pork).

Dinner is the main event and where you'll find the most famous Roman dishes. It usually starts late (after 8 PM). Look for the following cornerstone pasta dishes:

- Cacio e Pepe (Cheese and Pepper): The simplest and perhaps most famous. It's just pasta (usually tonnarelli), Pecorino Romano cheese, and lots of freshly ground black pepper, emulsified with starchy pasta water to form a creamy sauce.
- Carbonara: This is the king of Roman pasta. The sauce is made only from *guanciale*, eggs (not cream!), Pecorino Romano, and black pepper.
- Amatriciana: Named after the town of Amatrice, this sauce is essentially a Carbonara base with the addition of tomato and a touch of white wine. It uses *guanciale* and Pecorino cheese.

Roman desserts are usually simple and not overly sweet.

- Tiramisù: It's made with coffee-soaked ladyfingers, mascarpone cheese, and cocoa powder.
- Gelato: Italian gelato is denser and less creamy than American ice cream because it has less fat and is churned slower. It's also tastier. Eat it twice a day when in Rome.
- Maritozzo: A sweet, oblong yeast bun that's split and generously filled with fresh whipped cream. It's a classic Roman pastry.



Reflection Questions

1. Roman food is simple, hearty, and built on fresh, local ingredients, growing from a poor kitchen tradition. How do dishes like *Cacio e Pepe* or *Carbonara* reflect this idea of using simple ingredients to create deep flavors?
2. A typical Roman day of eating, from a quick standing espresso to a long, multi-course dinner. How does this daily rhythm of meals reflect the culture and lifestyle of Romans, and how is it different from your own daily eating habits?
3. Key ingredients like *pecorino romano* cheese and *guanciale* (cured pork cheek) are central to many famous Roman dishes. How do these few core ingredients help define *cucina romana* and give it a unique flavor compared to other types of cooking?
4. Eating like a Roman is drinking cappuccino only before 11 AM or choosing *pizza al taglio* for lunch. Why do you think knowing these small cultural details makes the eating experience about experiencing the local culture, not just trying the food?
5. If you were visiting Rome, which of the main dishes (*Cacio e Pepe*, *Carbonara*, *Amatriciana*, *Gricia*) or desserts (*gelato*, *maritozzo*) would you be most excited to try, and what about it sounds most appealing to you?

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