

# A nation that lives to eat Italian pleasures

It would be incorrect to speak of an Italian cuisine. It is regional food, writes Christine Salins.

It could be said that while the rest of us eat to live, the Italians live to eat. Nowhere else in the world do the pleasures of the table seem quite so abundant as they do in Italy.

While other cuisines may claim to be more refined or complex, only in Italy can simple pleasures such as a tomato sprinkled with a little olive oil or a slice of bread rubbed with garlic give people such joy. Everywhere, the passion for food is obvious.

The world's food might be becoming increasingly more globalised, but even today in Italy it would be incorrect to speak of an Italian cuisine. More correctly, it is regional food, with some overlapping from region to region but a remarkably distinct approach in terms of ingredients, techniques and dishes.

Olive oil is the quintessential ingredient that links the diverse cuisines of the Mediterranean, and Italy in particular, although even here there are differences, with some regions using olive oil more extensively than others.

Olives, along with seafood, tomatoes, cheese, breads, salads and an abundance of herbs, all characterise the Italian menu, even though you will eat Roman food in Rome and Tuscan food in Florence.

It is this difference between regions that has given birth to a series such as *Flavours of Italy* (New Holland, \$32.95 each). Titles include Rome, Tuscany, Sicily and Venice and each title in the series presents more than 50 of the favourite dishes from the profiled region.

Each book begins with a brief introduction to the region which helps to put the cuisine into some historical context. But by and large the recipes are allowed to speak for themselves, one to a page, accompanied by bright, eye-catching photographs. There are also some double-page spreads on themes such as olive oil, local festivals, wine and so on. Each book is written by individual authors who know their subject well.

Another beautiful series for aficionados of Italian cooking includes *Italy the Beautiful* and *Tuscany the Beautiful* (HarperCollins, \$35 each). With recipes by Lorenza de'Medici, who has numerous other books to her credit, these are big, lavish books with plenty of location shots as well as photos of the dishes.

They have been around for some time but were recently issued in softcover to keep the price down. In hardback, they would be twice the price.

*Italy the Beautiful* has an interesting section on pasta, which is unquestionably the great factor in the Italian diet.

After spaghetti, Italians love rice, particularly those who live in the northern regions.

People could argue for hours about which region of Italy has the best cuisine but certainly the food of Tuscany would have to rank a firm favourite.

Evidence from archaeological sites dating back to Etruscan times confirms that traditional Tuscan cuisine goes back 3000 years and that local eating habits have maintained a continuity through the centuries. The three basic elements of the cuisine — wine, olive and bread — are almost sacred.

Years ago, the *Australian Women's Weekly* brought out a book on Italian cooking which became one of its best-loved and best-selling books. Now a new edition has been produced (\$12 from



Braised Savoy Cabbage, one example of the wonderful vegetable dishes that grace the Italian table. Simplicity and freshness are key ingredients in Italian cooking.

Picture from: *Venice, Flavours of Italy series.*

newsagents), in which the dishes have been re-photographed to give it a fresh look. When it comes to the recipes, the same old favourites are there — simple pasta sauces, tender veal dishes, delicious risottos and pizzas — and as always there are excellent step-by-step instructions and photos.

From *Family Circle, Tastes of the Mediterranean* (\$11.95 from newsagents) takes a broad sweep around this beautiful part of the world, covering not just Italian cooking but Spain, Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Tunisia and Morocco as well.

More than 30 years ago, the Seven Countries Study found that a typical Mediterranean diet resulted in the highest rates of life expectancy. Other studies since have reinforced the view that it can reduce the incidence of cancer, heart disease and other ills.

While a Mediterranean diet might hold the key to being healthy, it certainly helps in being happy.

## All the flavours on gourmet trail

**W**alkabout Gourmet Adventures offers a seven-day Flavours of Italy tour centred around a 17th century hamlet in Etruria. It includes cooking seminars in a private kitchen, visits to wineries, an ancient olive mill, the making of ricotta cheese and gathering of mushrooms. Price: \$2495, not including air fares.

Its 14-day Follow the Gourmet Trail travels through Piedmont, Cinque Terre and Tuscany and features wonderful cheeses, grapes, wild herbs, grappa and the famous white truffles. The walk follows stunning coastal paths and includes accommodation in a grand country estate. Price: \$3945,

not including air fares. Inquiries: (03) 5159 6556 or [www.walkaboutgourmet.com](http://www.walkaboutgourmet.com)

Specialist Mediterranean holiday company Yalla offers a six-day Tuscan cooking class experience which includes three cooking classes by Chianti chefs, vineyard visits, wine-tastings and a visit to an olive mill. The self-drive rate is from \$1406 a person twin share (car hire extra) or \$2517 with transport. It also offers a six-day Tuscan wine-tasting experience, priced from \$993 a person twin share or \$2375 with transport.

Yalla now has villas in Lunigiana, a scenic region with excellent restaurants. Inquiries to your travel agent.

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