

WHEN IN ROME, WHERE TO EAT LIKE A ROMAN

by Lucy Gordan | Food, Food blog | 0 comments



The 9th century manuscript of De Re Coquinaria by Apicius found in a monastery in Fulda, Germany, and purchased by New York’s Academy of Medicine in 1929

From the ancient Romans we’ve inherited the basis for modern civil law and city planning, a standard coinage, a system of weights and measures, plumbing, aqueducts, bridges, ...and delicious food, represented best by pasta especially spaghetti alla carbonara or cacio pepe, gnocchi, saltimbocca, innards (the apex of authentic Roman cuisine), stuffed zucchini flowers, supplì (fried rice balls stuffed with mozzarella), pecorino or sheep cheese, puntarelle, and artichokes.

The world’s first recorded gourmets, alias buone forchette, owe their obsession with food, at least in part, to fellow citizen Marcus Gabius. Better known as Apicius, he was a wealthy and decadent epicure who in the first century wrote De Re Coquinaria (Concerning Culinary Matters), the world’s first cookbook. He specialized in spicy sauces and cakes and held extravagant feasts for his friends, in particular the emperor Tiberius’ son, at his seaside villa at Minturnae between Rome and Naples. Alas, when he’d blown most of his fortune, Apicius poisoned himself, afraid to die of hunger. After Apicius’s suicide, De Re Coquinaria was copied

and recopied. The oldest two surviving manuscripts are in the Vatican Library and in the New York Academy of Medicine.



Coda alla vaccinara



Elio and Francesco Mariani

Although many of Rome's some 5,000 bustling, clattery trattorie serving Roman specialties are family-run, only Checchino dal 1887 has belonged to the same family for so long—five generations so far. The restaurant is carved into the man-made Monte de' Cocci, a hill of discarded broken amphoras from ancient Rome's nearby port.

Brothers Chef Elio and Sommelier Francesco Mariani specialize, although not exclusively, in dishes using the quinto quarto or fifth quarter—offal, tripe, intestines, and oxtail—originally discarded or used as part of the workers' salaries at

slaughterhouse across the street which closed in 1975. In fact, coda alla vaccinara (oxtail braised with tomato and celery), now a classic of modern cucina romana, was invented here. Also always on the menu are: rigatoni con pajata (pasta with baby-calf intestines), animelle (sweetbreads), coratella con carciofi (chopped lamb heart, liver, lungs, and windpipe with artichokes), and trippa (tripe) cooked with wild mint and tomato sauce. Mondays and Tuesdays closed.



Sergio, Elio and Francesco's father serving rigatoni alla pajata to Aldo Fabrizi and the mayor of Rome in the 1950s

Another even older centenarian of gastronomic Romanity, but not always owned by the same family, is La Matriciana, founded in 1870 by Anna De Angelis from Amatrice and always located at Via del Viminale 44, a block from Rome's main railroad station, which had been built a few years before in 1863. At first her clients were the fruit and vegetable vendors from the nearby market, but, with the construction of the Teatro Costanzi in 1889 which became Rome's Opera Theater in 1929 and remains so today, La Matriciana grew in size and reputation. An admirer of its namesake dish bucatini all'amatriciana, also known for its ingredients as the 5-P plate (for pasta, pancetta, pomodoro, pecorino and peperoncino), the famous gourmand actor Aldo Fabrizi was a regular patron who added a sixth p for panza meaning paunch. Now La Matriciana belongs to the Crisciotti family- Fortunato and his two sons, Fabio and Mauro, both expert sommeliers. The extensive KM 0 menu includes the names and locations of the vendors of the dishes' ingredients. Closed Saturdays.

Still another centenarian Vecchia Osteria del Gelsomino has always been located in the same old house on Via del Gelsomino or Jasmine Street and is a five-minute walk from St. Peter's Basilica. Although, like La Matriciana, its owners have not always been members of the same family, its menu includes all the Roman classics and their ingredients are all kilometer 0 not to omit the extensive list of wines exclusively from Latium.

To return to dynastic institutions of Roman cuisine, another is Felice, owned by the Trivelloni family since 1936. Like Checchino dal 1887, it's located in the once working-class turned chic called Testaccio named for the Monte de' Cocchi. Felice's star dish is tonnarelli cacio pepe whisked at your table.

Present owner Franco, Felice's son, has posted its recipe on the restaurant's website. The favorite Roman restaurant of the world-famous actor Roberto Benigni, be sure to book (obligatory) at least five days in advance. In addition to the standard menu, Franco and his son



Tonnarelli cacio pepe

Maurizio have an additional separate menu for each day of the week. For the Romans eat fish on Tuesday and on Friday, gnocchi on Thursday and tripe on Saturday.

Still another dynastic institution of Roman cuisine is Sora Lella, founded in the 1950s by the short, plump, exuberant, comic actress Elena Fabrizi with her much more famous and even shorter and plumper gourmand comic actor older brother Aldo. The children of a widowed fruit vendor in Rome's historic food market in Campo de' Fiori, they considered their acting careers a hobby and their true profession restaurateur and

gastronome.



Sora Lella with a platter of her
rigatoni alla pajata

Located on the Tiber Island, the only island in Rome, it's across from the ancient port. Since 293 BC, when a temple was dedicated here to Aesculapius, the god of healing, there's always been a hospital.

After Sora Lella's death in 1993, her disciple and son Aldo Trabalza, also a distinguished poet in

Romanesco (the Roman dialect) took over. Now Aldo's four children, so the third generation, run the restaurant. His daughter Elena balances the books and runs the dining room; his son Simone does the marketing; and his two other sons Mauro and Renato, who learned Nonna Lella's recipes hands-on in the 1980s, are the chefs.



carciofi alla romana



Aldo Trbalza and his family



Bollito alla picchiapó

Her and now their mouth-watering starters include suppli, artichokes deep-fried Jewish style, and potato crochets. The menu includes all the classic “Roman” “quinto quarto” pastas, even some for celiacs. But the house specialty, on the menu since 1961, homemade tonnarelli alla cuccagna: with 18 different ingredients in the sauce: bacon, sausage eggs, and walnuts and more, is a must as are Renato's home-made ricotta cake with wild cherry sauce and his unforgettable gelati.

Recently, he opened “Maritozzi e Gelati” on Piazza San Francesco in Bologna. Available on the internet Sora Lella's Annamo Bene recounts her life and cuisine with recipes and Aldo Trbalza's Il mio amico l'albero di fico the family history. Closed Sundays.



Fettucine con regaje di
pollo



Trippa alla romana



Family photo outside "Armando al Pantheon"

Like Felice and Sora Lella, Armando al Pantheon, founded in the 1960s, is also in its third generation of the Gargioili family ownership. Just across the street from the Pantheon, the best preserved of all ancient Rome's buildings, Il mondo sta tutto in cucina: buon cibo e buona scrittura fanno felicità by present-owner Claudio recounts the family's history. Reservations must be made on line and only a month ahead of your desired meal. If you're among the lucky few to find a table, the musts are: spaghetti alla gricia, rigatoni con la pajata, and its non-plus-ultra homemade fettucine con la regaje di pollo (with chicken innards). Closed Sundays.



Flavio De Maio's book cover



Inside Velavevodetto

To these classics don't overlook these four family-run, but non-dynastic, newer-entries: For over 25 years a computer programmer, Flavio De Maio in 2009 opened the first of three Flavio al Velavevodetto (meaning "I told you so") across the street from Checchino da 1887, and also carved into Monte de' Cocci. (The other two are in Milan and Turin). Anthony Bourdain's favorite Roman eatery, De Maio too tells his story in *L'oste della porta accanto* and his website includes his recipe for spaghetti alla carbonara, considered the best in

Rome. Open every day. Both Trecca (closed Sundays) and Osteria Fratelli Mori (open every day), are also in Testaccio, and the newest of all (opened November 2023), Casa Sceppa, is a 10-minute walk from St. Peter's Basilica. Leave room for the homemade desserts. Closed Mondays.