

Basil, the Regal Herb, Features in Cuisine, Religion, Literature and Painting

From its origin as a pizza topping to inspiration for the Decameron, it's rich with lore



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



Basil. Photo: Wikipedia



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In the late spring little pots of the culinary herb *basilico* go on sale at flower stands and market stalls all over Italy. Placed on terraces and balconies, housewives and chefs add its hand-picked leaves to their summer dishes for color, fragrance, and anise-like flavor.

Originally a native of India and tropical regions of Africa and southeast Asia, today *basilico*, although used in cuisines worldwide, is particularly popular in Italy, especially in Genoa, where it's profusely cultivated on terrace farms close to the city. Basil is the main ingredient of *pesto*, a pasta sauce of crushed (*pesto* in Italian) basil leaves, pine nuts, garlic, Parmesan cheese and olive oil. For the best in town: *Trattoria Rosmarino*, *Trattoria dell'Acciughetta*, and *Trattoria delle Grazie*.

Basil also features prominently in southern Italian dishes like *pomodori al riso* (baked tomatoes stuffed with rice) and *insalata caprese* of mozzarella slices, tomatoes, and basil leaves named for the world-famous island of Capri where it was first served at the elegant Hotel Quisisana during the early 1920s. Just across the Bay of Naples, the *pizza Margherita*'s toppings have the same ingredients.

A legend recounts that on November 6, 1889 the *pizzaiolo* Raffaele Esposito, *Pizzeria Brandi*'s chef, invented this pizza in honor of the Queen of Italy, Margherita of Savoy, during her visit to Naples. He supposedly chose the toppings to represent the colors of the Italian national flag.



Pizza Margherita. Photo: Negative Space

While the *pizza Margherita* undoubtedly became more popular after the royal visit, a book by “a certain Riccio”, otherwise unknown, *Napoli, contorni e dintorni* (Naples, *side-dishes and surroundings*) (1830) had already described a similar pizza—as had Emanuele Rocco in 1849—but here the slices of mozzarella and basil leaves were arranged on the tomato paste in a flower shape because Margherita means “daisy” in Italian. For Naples’ best *margheritas*: *Pizzeria Pizzicotto*, *Sandro Pizzettate Unica Sede*, and *Pizzeria Sarita a Materdei*.



Outside the kitchen has a long religious significance. In ancient Egypt and Greece, and in Medieval Europe, it was placed in the hands of the dead to ensure a safe journey to eternal life. Today it's highly revered in Hinduism. In the Greek Orthodox Church, it's used to sprinkle holy water, while the Bulgarian, Serbian, Macedonian and Romanian Orthodox Churches prepare holy water with it and pots of the plant often decorate their church altars.

Some Greek Orthodox Christians avoid eating basil because of its association with the legend of The Elevation of the Holy Cross, celebrated on September 14. For, according to Orthodox teachings, St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine the Great, discovered the Holy Cross on September 14, 325 AD near Golgotha, where it had lain in dust for centuries. In the same place she also discovered a hitherto unknown plant of rare beauty and fragrance namely basil, so considered sacred.



William Holman Hunt's *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*. Photo: Wikipedia

Many centuries later basil was featured in the *Decameron*, a collection of 100 short stories written around 1350 by Giovanni Boccaccio for ten friends secluded in a villa outside Florence during the Black Death. In the fifth story a pot of basil is central to the plot. Elisabetta's family wish her to marry a prosperous nobleman, but she is in love with Lorenzo, her brothers' accountant. Her brothers murder Lorenzo and bury his body. He appears to Elisabetta, also known as Isabella, in a dream and tells her where he is buried. Broken-hearted, she exhumes his body, buries his head in a pot of basil, and tends the plant obsessively. When her brothers confiscate her pot, she dies shortly thereafter.

Boccaccio's story inspired the British poet John Keats (1795–1821), who tragically died in Rome of tuberculosis in an apartment near the Spanish Steps and is buried in Rome's Protestant Cemetery, to write in 1818 a long narrative poem entitled *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*. Keats' poem inspired three paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (a group of British painters who sought to revive the abundant detail, intense colors and complex compositions of *Quattrocento* Italian painting): John Everett Millais' *Isabella* (1849), John William Waterhouse's *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1868), and several copies of William Holman Hunt's *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1868). One of Hunt's, on loan from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, is on display until June 30 in the mega-exhibition, *Preraffaelliti: Rinascimento Moderno* in the Museo Civico San Domenico in Forlì.

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Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly *Inside the Vatican*...