Restaurants and Cafes

In some, eating out can be both a joy and an entertainment. On warm summer evenings tables flow out onto every conceivable open space, and diners dedicate long hours to the popular social activity of people watching (and of being noticed and admired themselves) in a confusion of passers-by, street performers, rose sellers and traffic. Although Romans have always loved to linger at the table, the lavish feasts of ancient Rome have been scaled down and today's cooking is based on simplicity, freshness and good quality local raw ingredients in what is essentially a seasonal cuisine. Fast food is gradually arriving, but it is fundamentally alien to the Roman temperament and way of life.

The 66 restaurants reviewed in this chapter have been selected from the best that Rome can offer across all price ranges. The chart on pages 310 and 311 will help narrow your selection, and the map on page 308 shows the highlights of the city. The section Light Meals and Snacks, featured on pages 318 to 321, has details of recommended cafeterias, pizzerias, wine bars and other places for more casual eating.

WHERE TO FIND GOOD RESTAURANTS

Every area of the city has its own culinary delights. True Roman cooking can be found in the old slaughter-house area of Testaccio and in the Jewish quarter (the Ghetto) near Campo de' Fiori. Around the university, in San Lorenzo, northeast of the city center, you will find lots of cheap pizzerias and trattorias. Near Termini station there's a good selection of African - particularly Ethiopian and Eritrean - restaurants. For dining outdoors, which often means in beautifully secluded plazas or in impressively ancient parts of the city, try the restaurants in the narrow streets of Trastevere (the old artists' quarter), around Campo de' Fiori, or along the old Via Appia Antica.

TYPES OF RESTAURANTS

In general, a trattoria is an unassuming family-run establishment with good home cooking, while a ristorante is more elegant and thus more expensive. Many eating places - where paper tablecloths give a clue to low prices - simply have no name. They offer an open doorway and, more often than not, excellent basic home cooking. Some of them offer a great deal more, and your chances of finding authentic Roman cooking are higher in the best of these establishments than in more expensive restaurants. There will probably be times when you do not want a full restaurant meal, and Rome offers a huge variety of places for more casual eating (see pp.316-21). One type of place offering snacks or more substantial dishes is the enoteca, which doubles as a well-stocked wine shop for browsers and connoisseurs.

Other places for a sit-down, informal lunch or dinner are birrierie, which are not only for beef drinkers but also offer pizzas or even four-course meals.

There is always plenty of interesting take-out food for sale - pizza rustica or pizza al taglio (a pizza by the slice) is available all over the city. For full-size pizzas, choose those with wood stoves (forno a legna) for better results. Then move on to the second, the main course or fish course, for which you will usually need to order vegetables (contorni) separately if you would like them. Afterwards you have a choice of desserts (cioccolato fondente, frutta o dolce (dessert))

The Price of a Meal

What you buy will clearly depend on your choice of establishment. In a tavola calda, or Roman pizzeria, for example, you can still eat for as little as 68 a head. A local trattoria costs perhaps 15, whereas in a smarter restaurant expect to pay around 25 and up. Bottled wine is, as opposed to a jug or carafe of house wine (vino della casa), commanded higher prices but can offer - more interesting range of tastes (see p.305). House wine can be a hit-or-miss affair.

Reading the Menu

Not every restaurant automatically provides a menu - the waiter will often tell you the day's specialties (pasti del giorno), usually not mentioned on the standard menu but almost always worth ordering. If you are not sure about these, you can ask for la lista (the menu) and then allow yourself to be guided.

A meal could begin with antipasti (appetizers) or primi piatti - the latter consisting of pasta alla genovese (pasta with a kind of sauce) pasta in broccoli, pasta in pesto, pasta in tomato sauce and so on. Pasta is often served as the main course and will serve as a satisfying lunch or dinner. Bistecche are open from about noon to 3pm and from 8 to 11pm, or much later. The busiest times tend to be 9 to 9.30pm for dinner and 1 to 1.30pm for lunch. Dinner is generally the preferred time for more relaxed eating, particularly in summer, when it begins and ends later. There are events all day, often from the early hours, serving all kinds of drinks (alcohol can be sold at any time of day) and snacks. The quietest month is August, when many family-owned owners take their annual vacation (shown by Chiuse per ferie signo).

Reserving a Table

Making a reservation (prenotazione) is generally advisable, especially for Sunday lunch and often for Saturday evening. Also, check the weekly closing day: many places are closed on Monday, and Sunday evening can also be difficult for reservations. In summer try to reserve a shady table outside, since air-conditioning is not universal, and induces the atmosphere may be study.

Wheelchair Access

Rome is slowly adapting to the needs of those in wheelchairs, but a call to the restaurant in advance will help secure the right table.

Taking Children Along

Children are very welcome, particularly in family-run places. You can usually order half-portions (but expect to pay more than half), or just ask for an extra plate. Highchairs (sedialetti) may also be available in some establishments.

Using the Listings

Key to symbols in the listings on pp.312 to 317:
- fixed-price menus
- non-smoking area
- vegetarian dishes
- child portions and sometimes highchairs
- wheelchair access
- IC or Diners Club
- MasterCard/American Express
- Visa
- Japanese Credit Bureau

Price categories for a three-course meal for one, including a half bottle of house wine, cover charge, tax and service:
- up to 15
- 16-25
- 25-45
- 45-65
- 65-85
- over 85
What to Eat in Rome

The traditional cucina romanesca has always relied on local markets full of fresh seasonal vegetables, fruit, cheese, and meat from the nearby countryside, plus seafood from the Mediterranean. As in the rest of Italy, pasta is an important part of the menu; one popular dish is the famous spaghetti alla carbonara, which was created in Rome. Many genuinely Roman meat dishes are based on the so-called quinto quarto (fifth quarter) – head, innards, tail, pig's feet and so on. Highly flavored with olive oil, herbs, bacon (pancetta) or pig's cheek (guanciale), they become a culinary delight. Fish from the Mediterranean is excellent. In season, mushrooms and artichokes may be served in dozens of different ways. Mosterciola is also good in season; it is a fresh mix of salad leaves, including the peppery rugbetta (arugula) and puntarelle (curly endive shoots, often served with anchovy dressing). For dessert, be sure to try Italian ice cream or puddings such as the classic tiramisù.

Fresh basil
Anthovies
Antipasto
Italian appetizers may include olives, cured meats, seafood and grilled or preserved vegetables.

Basil

Antipasti

Filetti di Baccali
A typical Roman snack of fresh cod fillets.

Olive Oil
and Vinegar
Always on the table, these are for dressing salads and flavoring antipasti.

Risotto alla Romana
Liver, sweetbreads, Marsala and Romano cheese are used to make this risotto.

Typical Italian Pasta

Penne rigate (quills)
Fettucine (spiral)
Conchiglioni (shells)
Cappelletti (small hats)

Bruschetta
Toasted bread is rubbed with salt, garlic and olive oil; tomato can be added.

Tiramisù
Mascarpone cheese, coffee and chocolate are combined for this wonderful dessert.

Antipasto

Penne Rigate

Risotto alla Romana

Filetti di Baccali

Gnocchi alla Romana
Small semolina dumplings are served with tomatoes or with butter.

Saltimbocca alla Romana
Veal with Parma ham and sage, this dish is also served rolled and shelled.

Italian Cheeses
Parmesan is the best-known Italian cheese, but Rome's classic is pecorino Romano, made from ewe's milk. The mature, hard version is often used grated, but fresh Romano can be eaten as a dessert cheese. Mild buffalo-milk mozzarella is the classic one for pizza.

Fave al Ganciale
Fresh springtime broad beans are simmered with bacon and onion.

Crostata di Ricotta
This Romas cheesecake is filled with ricotta, Marsala and lemon.

Bucatini all'Amatriciana
Spaghetti alla Carbonara
Stuffed pasta tubes are served with bacon, tomatoes and onion, with grated Romano on top.

Gnocchi alla Romana
Fiori di Zucca e Carciofi Fritti
Squash blossoms in batter and raw artichokes deep-fried are popular antipasti.
What to Drink in Rome

ITALY IS ONE OF EUROPE’S MOST significant wine-producing countries, keeping up a tradition started in the hills around Rome over 2,000 years ago. Today, wine is usually drunk with meals as a matter of course, and knowing the difference between rosso (red) and bianco (white) may be all the vocabulary you need to get by. Beer is widely available too, as well as good selections of aperitifs and digestifs. Rome’s drinking water, another debt to the ancient Romans, is particularly good, fresh and sweet, and in abundant supply.

WHITE WINE

Vines thrive in the warm climate of Lazio, the region around Rome, producing abundant supplies of inexpensive dry white wine for the city’s cafés and restaurants. It is usually sold by the canale. Of local bottled wines, Frascati is the best known, but Conejo, Terranone, Marino, Colli Albani and Velletri are very similar in style. All are made from one grape variety, the Trebbiano, though better quality versions contain a dash of Malvasia for perfume and flavor. Other central Italian whites worth trying are Orvieto and Verdicchio. Quality white wines from all over Italy, including fine whites from Friuli in the northeast, are widely available in Rome.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WINE TYPE</th>
<th>GOOD VINTAGES</th>
<th>GOOD PRODUCERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frascati (Pinot Bianco, Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, Sauvignon)</td>
<td>The most recent</td>
<td>Greve in Castello, Fumone, Schiopetto, Valpolicella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orvieto/Orvieto Classico</td>
<td>The most recent</td>
<td>Antinori, Benvenuti, Bigi, Il Palazzino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Wine</td>
<td>95, 88, 85</td>
<td>Antinori, Castello di Ama, Castello di Ceresa, Castello di Volpaia, Fossati, Bolgheri, I Poggiolo, Rocca delle Macie, Ruffino, Vigneto di Montalcino, Villa Caffino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chianti/Chianti Classico/Chianti Rufina</td>
<td>95, 88, 85</td>
<td>Colle Spola, Il Castello di Ama, Il Palazzino, Rocca delle Macie, Ruffino, Vigneto di Montalcino, Villa Caffino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunello di Montalcino/Vino Nobile di Montepulciano</td>
<td>95, 88, 85</td>
<td>Albenga, Avignonesi, Biondi Santi, Caparroso, Corte de’ Blas, Lisini, I Poggiolo, Poliziano, Villa Sandi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barolo/Barbaresco</td>
<td>95, 88, 88, 88</td>
<td>Aldo Conterno, Altesch, Conterno, Clerico, Guia, Giacomo Conterno, Gavi, Mascarello, Ratti Voerzi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

READING THE LABEL

ITALY has a two-tier system for labeling quality wines. DOC (denominazione di origine controllata) means you can be sure the wine is from the region declared on the label and is made from designated grape varieties. A higher classification — DOCG (denominazione di origine controllata e garantita) — is given to top wines such as the red Barolo, Barberesco, Chianti Classico and Brunello di Montalcino.

RED WINE

THOUGH SOME local red wine is made, most of the bottled red wine in Rome comes from other parts of Italy. Tuscany and Piedmont produce very good everyday drinking wines as well as top-grade ones like Barolo. Price should reflect quality — try Bolgheri, Rosso di Montalcino or Montepulciano, all affordable reds.

APÉRITIFS AND OTHER DRINKS

Bitter, herb-flavored drinks like Martini, Campari or Aperol are the most popular aperitifs. (Ask for an analcolico if you prefer a non-alcoholic one.) Italians drink their aperitifs neat or with ice and soda. Strong, herby after-dinner drinks, known as digestivi or amari, are worth trying if you need to settle your stomach. Italian bitters and grappas can be very fiery. Italian beer, popular with pizza, is made in larger style.

SOFT DRINKS

ITALIAN FRUIT JUICES are good and most bars squeeze fresh orange juice (spremuta di arancia) on the spot. Iced coffee and fruit-flavored tea, such as peach, are popular.

DRINKING WATER

Unlike many Mediterranean cities, Rome benefits from a constant supply of fresh drinking water, piped down from the hills through a system of pipes and aqueducts that has changed little from ancient Roman times. Only if there is a sign saying acqua non potabile is the water not safe to drink.

Coffee is almost more important to Romans than wine. For strong black coffee, have espresso at any time of day. Try milky cappuccino for breakfast or mid-afternoon or for extra milk, caffe latte.