#EUROPE

The Founder of Puglia's Most Respected Cooking School Wants You To Stop Thinking Of All Italian Food As The Same

A world of difference, from ingredients to ethos.

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By Jacqueline Parisi 10 FEBRUARY 2019

The first thing you'll notice upon entering Silvestro Silvestori's home in the heart of Lecce—a city that sits snug in the Apulia region of the sun-drenched heel of Italy—is how colorful it is.

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Bright red walls are lined with a rainbow of colanders and cutting boards hanging from nails, extending up the vaulted ceilings. Bundles of fragrant parsley cascade out of their bowl like flowers in a vase, plump cherry tomatoes resting nearby. The large, worn wooden tables are covered with a dizzying array of neatly-folded dish towels, utensils and hefty, cast-iron pots and pans—all telltale signs of an industrial kitchen. But of course, that's not where you are. This is Silvestori's home, which happens to also serve as the home of The Awaiting Table—Puglia's most respected cooking school and wine program that he founded in 2003.

The Awaiting Table

With over 15 years of experience teaching students from 59 countries around the world (and, before that, doing nearly every food-related job in Italy—from cutting meat to baking bread, picking artichokes to decorating wedding cakes), this self-taught cook and certified sommelier knows a thing or two about Italian cuisine… if, that is, you can even categorize it in such broad brushstrokes.

"Northern pasta and southern pasta are so different that their only common ingredient is the salt in the cooking water," says Silvestori. "Only those outside of Italy see them as interchangeable or even related."

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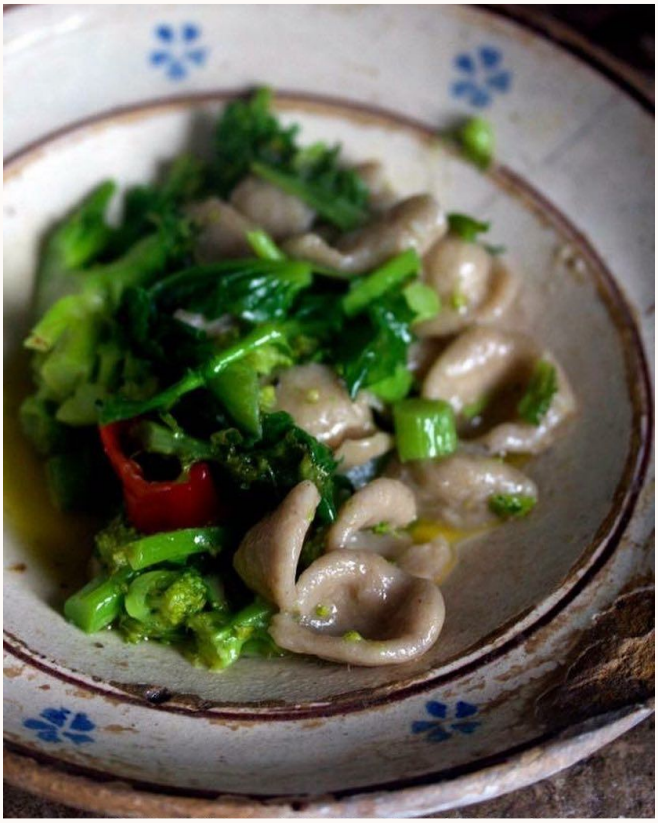
Southern Italian pasta is composed of hard durum wheat and water (oftentimes with 30% barley flour added as well). Sauces always rely heavily on olive oil, and often on bitter greens and herbs. It's rustic—"like a good country bread," says Silvestori. On the contrary, Northern Italian pasta makes use of more refined, white cake flour with eggs serving as the liquid. Sauces start with a base of butter or lard, resulting in a dish that's silky, arguably more elegant, perhaps even dainty.



A traditional Southern Italian pasta dish made with barley orecchiette and chicory | The Awaiting Table

But then again, flavor isn't the only consideration.

"The pasta of the south has a low glycemic index, [oftentimes] so low that many of the calories never enter into the bloodstream as they are metabolized in the digestion," explains Silvestori. "It's pasta as health food."

Once you zoom out and move beyond the context of a single dish like pasta, it's difficult to succinctly and explicitly characterize the country's regional gastronomic differences. In fact, to even try and do so would be to embark on what Silvestori thinks of as "a fool's errand."

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But if he had to generalize, he'd venture to say that the difference all boils down to the way ingredients are treated, and the approach that's taken in their transformation from raw to cooked state.

"The north transforms ingredients into culture through the cooking process," posits Silvestori, who uses the example of a long-simmered ragù as a dish that, once complete, has no easy-to-recall connection with the raw state of the ingredients. And on the other hand, there's the southern stance, which is "to find great ingredients and do less to them. Make ingredients taste as 'strawberrious' as possible. Bring out the intensity of the greens. Taste the wheat in the pasta. Make the ingredients as emblematic of themselves as possible."

Silvestro Silvestori | The Awaiting Table

To reference Italian cuisine as just that, *Italian*, is to discount both the granular, ingredient-focused idiosyncrasies and broader distinctions in ethos that distinguish one region from another. And what's more, as is the case with most "Old World" countries in Europe, Italy doesn't have a sense of nationalism at all. Instead, it's profoundly regional, right down to the town or village—which is why, Silvestori told us, if you see someone with an Italy tattoo or bumper sticker, they are most likely from Brooklyn, Sydney or Manchester.

But that's not to say there is no culinary through-line uniting the country. Because there is. It just happens to be less about what you eat than how you eat: antipasto to start, carbs-before-meat, salad at the end—a sequence with economic and, ahem, digestive ramifications.

In its literal sense, *antipasto* translates to "before the meal" ("anti" as "anticipation") and precedes the first course, or *il primo*, which is all about carbohydrates. Pasta, polenta, risotto—not interchangeable, but regional.

"This is the calorie load," explains Silvestori, "the belly filler before the more expensive ingredients arrive."

Next up, *il secondo*, a protein-forward course and the only one that has a side dish (*contori*, or "contours"). In the south, this course comes to life with a simple piece of grilled fish or roasted chicken, and a side of broccoli raab or foraged chicory—greens "with a little attitude," says Silvestori.

"This adds bulk on top of your food, encouraging locomotion in the stomach," adding that digestibility is often a marker of having eaten well in Italy. For that same reason, salad is consumed at the end of the meal, "as a sort of caboose" rather than as an appetizer, as is commonplace in the United States.

And then, of course, there's the dessert—something which Silvestori says is not a given, save for holidays and Sunday lunch.

Progression of the courses aside, there's a world of subtle nuances in Italian gastronomy that has so charmed Silvestori for most of his life. It's what propelled him to open The Awaiting Table, and it's what has kept international tourists flooding in ever since.

The Awaiting Table

So if you're planning a trip to Italy, take Silvestoi's advice and make sure half your time is spent in smaller cities of about 50,000 to 100,000 people since you're more likely to experience "real life" here compared to the big tourist destinations like Rome, Venice and Florence.

"The quality of your trip is determined not on the road but before you leave home. Research it before you go."

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