

# AT HOME IN ROME

Whether you stay for a week or a year, a trip to a faraway place is a chance to get to know a culture from the inside—especially if you shop, cook, and eat like a local. When a New York City food writer and her family found themselves in Italy’s capital for seven months, they started out at the markets, and soon felt as if they’d lived there forever. Now back stateside, she shares how to find a feast for the soul, wherever you go.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Simon Wheeler** | TEXT AND RECIPES BY **Anna Kovel**



The small shops of Rome are full of regional delicacies. 1. Guanciale and other salumi at the butcher. 2. The author and her husband grocery-shopping. 3. Just-made pasta all'uovo. 4. Sheep's-milk ricotta. 5. Fresh anchovies dipped in breadcrumbs and fried up. 6. The author's son trying new tastes. 7. Presoaked chickpeas, quickly cooked at home, in a summer salad with tomatoes, onions, and herbs. 8. A lesson in cleaning fish at the pescheria. 9. Bakery-made sweets.



# HI

**Here's the thing about traveling:** It's so easy to just glide over the surface of a place—seeing a little bit of this, tasting some of that—while barely making a ripple, like a flat stone skipping on a river. But there is a different way, one that involves becoming attuned to the language, both spoken and visual, and to the seasons. The richest language, I have found, is that of food. You learn it at the

markets, through the local produce vendors and the fishmongers. By visiting them daily and joining in the routines of a neighborhood, you can feel like a local—even if only for a few days.

That's how my family lived when we ended up in Rome for the better part of a year. My husband had been offered the ideal position: teaching in a study-abroad program. We didn't hesitate a moment before pulling our son out of first grade in Brooklyn and signing him up for school in a foreign city. Despite our lack of language skills or much of an itinerary, it was an opportunity for all of us to share an adventure—the kind that doesn't come along often. There was no answer but yes. Among the three of us, we packed nine bulky bags, which we hauled off to the airport on a gray December evening. And between our first day and our last we found our way, step by step, along the worn black paving stones of a crowded Roman neighborhood—home.

We started slowly, listening to the winter rain pummel our little patio, situated in the ancient quarter of Trastevere, for weeks on end before giving way to the sweetly scented air of spring. Jasmine and bougainvillea exploded everywhere, and suddenly market tables overflowed with the first vivid Sicilian cherries; tiny, sweet strawberries; and blushing apricots with fragrant, soft skin. Exuberance was everywhere, and it was contagious: I wanted in. I wanted to know where those berries were grown, how many more weeks until the fava beans would appear, and how best to cook the fresh anchovies I saw at the *pescheria*. I didn't yet have the Italian words to ask about any of this, so I watched and learned.

All of this curiosity and longing wasn't just about putting dinner on the table; food is my passion and my work. I am a professional cook and food stylist, and a former food editor at *Martha Stewart Living*. So most days I would experiment with the fresh things I bought by putting together meals in the kitchen of our home. We saved restaurants for visits from friends and weekend lunches, when we'd linger, Italian-style, over plates of pasta all'Amatriciana and rabbit alla cacciatora. The other exception was Friday, when the family would stroll to the Neapolitan pizzeria Ai Marmi and watch the taciturn *pizzaioli* spin their dough and stoke the fire. Afterward, my son would choose a creamy dessert in a tall conical glass to end the school week decadently with the dip of a long spoon.

Between meals—and not least because of our enjoyment of them—we began to pick up a bit of basic Italian, and also an inkling of what creates the layers of a community and its customs. Our experience of setting up a home, shopping at markets, and sharing our favorite places with visiting friends created a love for Rome that feels eternal. We developed a crush, like the juice of the red blood oranges at our corner bar, on the city: on its edges, as sharp as the bitter greens on our table and as salty as pecorino Romano; yet also on its gentle sweetness, like that of the ripest fig. If only that sentiment could have defined the first of many chapters. Instead it was a long introduction that offered warm and valuable lessons for making yourself at home, wherever you may roam.



## 1 MORNINGS ARE FOR MARKETS

Wander the stalls early, while the cobblestones are still cool, and watch for what's new each week. Stone fruits from Sicily, like the dark cherries (*ciliegie*) and delicate doughnut peaches (*pesca tabacchiera*), below, appear in early summer. They are best consumed within days of harvesting, so let your vendor choose for ripeness based on when you plan to eat the fruit—today (*oggi*) or tomorrow (*domani*).



## 2 START WITH THE CLASSICS

And then build on them. Ripe melon and prosciutto di Parma make a perfect couple, but other ingredients pair well, too. Speck, a cured ham from the Dolomite Mountains, brings a smoky note; fresh figs, doughnut peaches, and mellow June apricots are sweet additions; and a creamy cheese (such as Robiola) adds depth.

### 3

#### TALK TO THE EXPERTS

Once you learn a few basic words, you'll feel more comfortable at the *alimentari* and the butcher counter. If you don't know how much you need, for instance, tell the shopkeeper how many you're serving (for four people: "*per quattro persone*"), and she will do the math. Or ask, "*Posso?*" ("May I?") while gesturing at a basket of produce, and the vendor will hand you a plastic bucket to fill yourself.



### 6

#### COOK STEM-TO-BLOSSOM

Italians leave no part of the vegetable behind—easy enough to do when you have an abundance of  *fiori di zucchini* (zucchini flowers). Use the petals to top ricotta-filled cannelloni, and cook the zucchini into a savory side.



### 4

#### DARE TO BE SIMPLE

With ingredients this fresh, you don't need to fuss. Have the butcher slice and pound your chicken; then you can pan-fry and serve it with greens, a few shavings of cheese, and a squeeze of lemon. This truly is dinner in 10.



### 5

#### KICK BACK AT DUSK

The *aperitivo* hour is a tradition worth honoring. Get store-bought marinated peppers, olives, and tomatoes and enjoy them with local salumi, cheeses, artisanal flatbreads, and hand-rolled breadsticks that speak to regional styles and culture. Then take time out to sit and talk, looking at the golden light with a spritz in hand.



7

ASK FOR DIRECTIONS

This recipe for delicate spinach gnocchi with clams—a Sardinian favorite—is courtesy of the *pastai*o (pasta maker). Don't hesitate to reach out for guidance, even if you have to use lots of hand gestures; the grumpiest of shopkeepers will respond to genuine curiosity and a smile.



9

LET SOMEONE ELSE COOK

Romans take shortcuts (when they're delicious), so why shouldn't you? Roasted meats and cooked vegetables, such as these stuffed tomatoes, *below*, are readily available. After you've been out seeing the city, bring something home to anchor a summer dinner with bread and wine.



ART DIRECTION AND STYLING BY JENNIFER WAGNER

8

TAKE THE HINT

Just-caught seafood, like anchovies and clams, *left*, is often sold with a handful of parsley—a gentle suggestion that the two belong together, much like espresso and dolci, *below*.



10

ENJOY THE MOMENTS

The best lesson is simply this: Slow down. I learned to prolong the warm evening hours, watching children kick a soccer ball, or sitting on fountain steps as a zany clown performed in the piazza. Adjust your schedule, share stories of the day with your loved ones while dinner waits, and bring home the ripest berries from a stall or sweetest cookies from your favorite bakery—it's the local way.

