



It's Italy in a nutshell. Here are some things you may not know and some that you might know about Italy. It's a little of this and a little of that.



This is Part 2 of the Food Nutshell. Here, we are going to tell you about the odd and unusual things that are eaten in Italy--even today. By the way, we've saved the best for last. Keep an open mind.

Let's take a look at some of these more uncommon foods. You may have heard that Rome, in particular, is known for its use of offal in cooking (the innards of the animal). But there are other Regions that use unusual ingredients, too. Here are a few examples.

- Stuffed mice with mince are still eaten today. The mice are a protected species now, but in ancient Roman times, they were stuffed with minced meat, nuts, herbs and spices. Some say this ancient delicacy is still eaten (in the tens of thousands!) in a small village located in the Southern Italian region of Calabria. (Helps with mice control, too.)



- If you lean toward veggies instead of meat, there are some vegetables served in Italy that are hard to find anywhere else. *Agretti* looks like a thick grass. It is boiled and mixed with some lemon juice and olive oil. *Cicoria*, or dandelion leaves, grows plentifully as a weed, but Italians turn it into a tasty but bitter side dish. (If you take a ride out in the country, look for it along the side of the road growing wild.)



Agretti

▪ And there are the delicious zucchini flowers--*fiori di zucca*--stuffed with anchovy and mozzarella cheese, then fried. Or, stuffed with prosciutto, ricotta, and parmigiano and fried or baked. Or, Slivers of the flowers are sautéed and mixed with pasta. Cooking the flowers are not difficult. Here in the US you can often get the flowers at Farmer's Markets. Want to see how to do it? [Click here.](#)



▪ *Sangunaccio Dolce* (sweet blood), certainly a word that rolls well off the tongue. In southern Italy, pig's blood (warm) is mixed with cream and chocolate. It's eaten the day before Ash Wednesday. If you like the flavor of salty, sweet, rich chocolate pudding with a nice bitter aftertaste, this one's for you.

Looks good enough to eat!

▪ Songbirds (Lombardy) are not the ones that sing to you in the morning. They're the ones that get stuffed with random meat bits (pork, beef, rabbit, and even bits of little birds!). Then, they are slow broiled on skewers and traditionally served with polenta.

▪ *Coda alla vaccinara* is cow tail stewed for hours in a savory tomato sauce. By the time it's finished cooking the meat is so tender it falls from the bone, having absorbed all the tasty flavors from its sauce.

▪ In the Testaccio area of Rome it is easy to find plates of *quinto quarto*, or offal. This was where the city's slaughterhouse was located. The slaughterhouse employed many men and paid them a pittance. Since the finest cuts went to paying clients, the slaughterhouse owners gave its workers the cast-off parts: the tail, the intestines and the stomach (tripe). The Roman women who got these cuts of meat from their butcher husbands learned how to cook these morsels into delicious meals that are still a staple of traditional Roman food. Even today in Florence, you will find (cleaned) guts stewing in broth and slung into bread rolls, or on a plate with spicy or herbed sauces .

▪ *Frittelle di cervello* are fried lamb, calf or veal brains, a delicious treat that is even better with fresh black peppercorns and a little fresh lemon squeezed on top.



▪ Only in Italy is there a special procedure for Genovese Pesto. After all, that stuff is like gold. When you take the plane, you can usually only bring 100 ml of liquids in your carry-on (the typical 3 ounces). But in Genoa, passengers can bring up to 500g of pesto (about 2½ cups). However, they must make a donation of 50 cents or more to a charity, then the pesto is taken to a special pesto scanner, and finally allowed on board. If you want

to try the Pesto alla Genovese sauce, [Click here](#) for a recipe from the Giallo Zafferano kitchen.

- We've saved the best for last. Look at this beautiful cheese. So pretty until you take the top skin off! It's called *Casu Marzu*.

- This cheese is produced in Sardinia, a traditional sheep milk cheese that contains live maggots. The larvae are deliberately introduced to the cheese and they make the texture of the cheese very soft. The larvae themselves appear as translucent white worms, roughly one-third inch long.



- How do those little worms get into the cheese? Whole pecorino cheeses are left outside with part of the rind removed to allow the eggs of the cheese fly to be laid in the cheese. The eggs hatch and the larvae begin to eat through the cheese. By the time it's ready to eat, it will contain thousands of these maggots.

- Only cheese in which the maggots are still alive is usually eaten, although allowances are made for cheese that has been refrigerated, which kills them. It's spread on Sardinian flatbread and served with a strong wine (probably to kill the taste). This cheese is believed to be an aphrodisiac by Sardinians--that's probably why they eat it.

- Because the larvae in the cheese can launch themselves for distances up to 6 inches, diners hold their hands above the sandwich to prevent the maggots from leaping. It's not so unusual, really. There are cultures that eat ants, cockroaches, etc., after all.

- Is this stuff safe to eat? It can lead to an infection and that's why the European Union food hygiene-health regulations outlawed the cheese. Any offenders face heavy fines. However, Sardinians tout that no one has ever gotten sick or died from it so they make it anyway. (Oh, good! It's still available!)

- We're sure you'd like to see how it's made and if people really eat it.

[Click here](#) to see!