



## HOW TO PICK AN AUTHENTIC ITALIAN RESTAURANT IN THE US

How to choose an Italian restaurant outside Italy

Submitted by [paolo](#) on Fri, 09/23/2016 - 20:08

In 2012 I travelled through Siberia.

Before I left, everybody told me to forget coffee in the morning and to be prepared for a tea-only breakfast. Well, I guess those people had not been to Siberia for many years. Not only was I surprised to see carts in the streets selling **cappuccino**, but both cappuccino and good coffee were readily available everywhere (at least in the cities). When I finally arrived to Ulanbattar, in Mongolia, I had a cappuccino that looked so good I had to take a picture. There was more: pizza and all Italian food was, in general, very authentic.

My conclusion is that because of the iron curtain Italian food arrived in Siberia just in the last few years and, very simply, there has not been time to "elaborate" on the original to suit it more closely to local taste.

In the US, on the other hand, Italian food arrived over 100 years ago. During this time (particularly in the early years of immigration from Italy), Italian hospitality businesses tried to "**adjust**" the food to **American taste** in order to become more popular. Many Italian American small-town businesses still believe that, unless they adjust traditional recipes to please the American palate, they will go out of business. Moreover, even when businesses have been running for decades, current owners are just children and grandchildren of Italian immigrants, who have had very little contact with real Italian food.



*No: Spaghetti Marinara with Garlic Bread has nothing to do with Italian food. Ph. flickr/Kelly Garbato (flic.kr/p/dHUFNg)*

Unfortunately for me, Italian-American cuisine is what I like the least: overcooked pasta with some sort of sauce and always heavy with garlic powder on top. Sometimes, the red sauce even has a menacing purple color. After that, you can have a salad with "Italian dressing" and who knows what is in there... I can smell old style Italian-American cuisine from across the road, because of the heavy use of the powdered garlic they place everywhere.

I go to Italy 4 times a year and I managed to keep in touch with modern Italian cooking style and tastes, so I still know well what real Italian food is, in spite of many years of life in the US. Also for this reason, during my many years in America I developed a method to figure out how to distinguish a true Italian from an Italian-American restaurant. Let us begin with...

## WHERE NOT TO EAT

I realized I can spot an Italian-American restaurants from the menu. The more items in the list below are in the menu, the less the restaurant is authentic Italian. Steer clear from any of the following:

### **Appetizers**

- Garlic Bread
- Cheese Garlic Bread
- Fried Mozzarella sticks

### *Pasta*

- Spaghetti with meatballs
- Spaghetti with Marinara sauce
- Pasta Alfredo
- Lasagna



*No! This garlic bread stuffed with spaghetti looks disgusting to the eye of an Italian. Ph. flickr/Adam S (flic.kr/p/7hBqUa)*

### **Main Courses**

- Chicken / Veal piccata
- Chicken / Veal Marsala
- Eggplant parmesan
- Meatball parmesan

....The adjective "Tuscan" (if you find Tuscan in the menu what they serve is most probably not Tuscan at all)

### *Cheeses*

- Provolone
- Asiago

### *Dessert*

- Spumoni

In this type of restaurants, bread is often served with powdered garlic on top and butter on the side. Pasta is served in the same dish as chicken, fish or any other main course.

In main cities, however, new small restaurants runned by Italians are opening and things are improving.

Now that you have an idea of where not to eat, let us see how to recognize an authentic Italian eatery!



No: an extremely creamy sauce like this one is unacceptable in a truly Italian Restaurant. Ph. flickr/stu\_spivack (flic.kr/p/8oreUd)

## WHERE TO EAT

A true Italian restaurant should always have, if not all, at least a good chunk of the following in their menu:

### *Appetizers*

- Prosciutto e Melone
- Insalata Caprese
- Salads that include radicchio or rughetta
- Some sort of tuna or steak tartar
- Something in Balsamic Vinegar
- Something in truffle sauce



Yes: Prosciutto e Melone in the menu is a good sign of authentic Italian Restaurants.  
Ph. depositphotos/Orlando.B

### *Pasta*

- Fresh Tagliatelle
- Spaghetti alle Vongole (clams)
- Spaghetti with seafood
- Tortelloni
- Gnocchi

### *Main Courses*

- Grigliata mista di carne o pesce
- Skewers with fish or meat
- Grilled meat or chicken with rosemary
- Lamb marinated in lemon and rosemary
- Steak in truffle sauce
- Artichokes
- Porcini mushrooms





Yes: Spaghetti alle Vongole in the menu = the restaurant is probably authentic Italian

### *Cheeses*

- Mozzarella di Bufala Campana
- Pecorino Toscano

### *Desserts / Dolci*

- Assorted Tuscan cookies served with sweet "dipping" wine
- Assorted homemade ice creams and fresh fruit sorbets



Keep these hints in mind next time you are around town looking for some traditional Italian grub, and you should be able to enjoy a truly authentic Italian experience.

By Paolo Nascimbeni