

# HOW TO COOK A REAL ITALIAN MEAL

Irish restaurants are short-changing their customers by serving up shoddy, inauthentic Italian dishes at outrageous prices. **Paolo Tullio** reveals how it should be done

I'm not by nature grumpy, cantankerous or curmudgeonly but there is one thing that pisses me off more than anything else and that's so-called Italian restaurants that serve bad, inauthentic dishes made from crap ingredients.

Given that everything in this country is expensive, I could just about get my head around paying €3 for an espresso or €18 for a pizza or a plate of pasta if any of it was any good. But what gets my hackles rising is being asked to pay silly prices for stuff that shouldn't be offered even as pig swill.

Let's take an example: Caprese salad. You find it just about everywhere. It's a salad that comes from the island of Capri, which is how it got its name. It has just four ingredients – mozzarella, tomatoes, basil and olive oil. Under that name I've been handed a dish made of pasteurised cows' milk mozzarella sprinkled with dried basil, interspersed with hard, unripe tomatoes and the lot then 'drizzled' with a cheap and nasty olive oil.

If a dish has only four ingredients, it works only if all the ingredients are right. In this case what you ought to have on your plate is buffalo milk mozzarella, leaves of fresh basil, ripe tomatoes – preferably San Marzano – and a good extra virgin olive oil. If you ever taste that combination, you'll never again be satisfied with the ersatz, second-rate crap that gets passed off here under the name of Caprese salad.

If you keep substituting inferior ingredients for the right ones, you end up with an inferior dish. That's not rocket science, just plain common sense. Thirty years ago a restaurateur could have been forgiven for substituting bacon for pancetta in a carbonara, but these days there's no excuse.

You can get pancetta easily enough by the simple expedient of asking for it. Global distribution means you can get the real thing if you can be bothered to look for it.

Here's an analysis I've heard many times in my life from restaurateurs. "It's fine like this. The Irish aren't fussy. Anyway they don't really like the dish done the Italian way." Oh yeah?

Any Irish people that I know who've been to Italy – and these days that's quite a lot – like the food there just fine. They don't ask for a special Irish version in Italian restaurants; they eat the dish just the way Italians do



Mama mia! Paolo Tullio tucks in to an authentic spaghetti dish in his mother's house

and they enjoy it. So why can't we get the real thing here?

Another example: the espresso. Just so we know we're talking about the same thing, an espresso is not a small black

coffee. It's made differently from a filter coffee or a cafetière.

It's made by forcing water at high pressure (it's expressed, hence the name) through 6 grams of coffee grains. When it's

done with a well-maintained machine you get a 'crema', a beige coloured foam on top that comes from the oils in the coffee beans.

If it doesn't have the 'crema'

on top, then it's as much use as a Guinness with no head. It's simply a black coffee. A proper crema will support a spoonful of sugar for ten seconds or so before it drops through into the

coffee below.

Next time you're served an espresso with no crema, complain loudly.

It's not just using inferior ingredients that gets my goat, using the wrong ones entirely has much the same effect. THERE IS NO CREAM IN CARBONARA. Nor does it have mushrooms or white wine, nor is it drizzled with pesto.

Putting cream into carbonara is simply lazy. It's done to make sure the eggs don't overcook, a task that's better accomplished by keeping an eye on the pasta while stirring them in.

Truth is, Italian cooking is labour-intensive; it doesn't have short cuts. It's also precise.

Prosciutto and melon works if you use the sweet San Daniele prosciutto coupled with a ripe melon slice. A hard, unripe melon served with a salty Spanish Serrano ham isn't the same thing at all.

Nor is pasta Amatriciana – and it's Amatriciana, not Matriciana as some restaurants have it – cooked with bacon. It's cooked with guanciale, and you can get it here, so again no excuses.

Perhaps the single most bastardised Italian dish is spaghetti Bolognese. Just so you know, a Bolognese sauce is not a tomato sauce with some mince thrown in, it's a meat sauce to which, after many hours of simmering, some tomato is added – see below for an authentic recipe.

If all this sounds pernickety and nit-picking to you, good. It is. Italian cuisine is exact, careful, and places huge emphasis on the proper ingredients.

In Italy people take as much time sourcing their ingredients as they do cooking them – that's why the food tastes good there.

A good 90pc percent of all the restaurants in Ireland that call themselves Italian are that in name only. The vast majority serve up a kind of half-Irish, half-Italian food that only tastes good to people who haven't tasted the genuine article.

It's artless, inauthentic and often cooked by people who have never even been to Italy. How is that ever going to work?

There are Italian restaurants in Ireland that do try hard, but I've only found one to date that really makes no compromises at all. It's called the Via Veneto, but you'll have to go to Enniscorthy if you want to try it.

If not, try these two recipes to discover that real, authentic Italian taste.

Buon appetito!

## The perfect Spaghetti alla Carbonara

Carbonara is a classic dish from Lazio. Originally it was made by charcoal burners (hence the name) in the mountains to the southeast of Rome and its beauty is its simplicity. This is my own recipe handed down through the family.

Traditionally the dish is made with spaghetti but it works well with penne. For four people you'll need a 500g packet of pasta, 4 large or 5 small eggs, 350g

of pancetta, salt, pepper, olive oil and Parmesan cheese.

Put the water on to boil – you'll need a pot that holds at least 5 litres to cook 500g of pasta properly. Add one teaspoon of salt for each litre of water. (This is a general rule for cooking pasta.)

When the water is boiling vigorously throw in the pasta. Don't always trust the cooking time given on the packet, keep trying it

and keep stirring it so that it won't stick together.

Cut the pancetta into small cubes the size of lardons and put it into a large skillet or frying pan with enough olive oil to cover the bottom of the pan. Let the pancetta cook on a low heat so that its fat renders.

Separate the eggs and keep only the yolks. Add a splash of water to them and whisk them well, adding freshly ground black pepper. Grate two

ounces of Parmesan into the eggs and whisk. If this makes the mixture thick, add a dash of water.

When the pasta is cooked, strain it and return it to the pot. Now add the pancetta and olive oil and stir well. Next pour in the beaten egg yolks.

There is no need to keep the pot on the gas, the residual heat of the pasta will cook the egg. Stir well and serve with optionally more grated Parmesan.