

Dispatches from Italy: Pizza, spaghetti and a very greasy hamburger

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By John Miller

"I love Italian food but that's too generic a term for what's available now: you have to narrow it down to Tuscan, Sicilian, and so on." – Lee Child

Yes, believe it or not, a person I met somewhere along the line said the food in Italy is to die for. But based on my limited experience, I'm defiantly not ready to go that far just yet. At the time I'm writing this, I've only been in Florence for seven days but the number of incredible meals is disappointingly low.



On this trip, the first real Italian dish I had was pizza. I ordered it on the first night, in a small restaurant with Luis and Vince. I can't recall the name but it was just across the Arno from my flat. I ordered a margherita pizza with extra garlic. You might think that it was the extra garlic that did it in, but you'd be wrong. I could barely taste the garlic; it was more of a hint. I ate half of it at the restaurant and saved the rest for my breakfast the next morning. This pizza lacked something: it lacked pizzazz; it lacked that wow factor. It was good, just not what I was expecting.

A couple days later, I had another margherita pizza. This one blew the first right out of the water. I got it for lunch in one of the millions of small restaurants that dot the sides of the streets. I was out with Vince, Mark and a kid I just met, Paul Michael. Paul was from Boston— born and raised. Super nice guy, but I'm sure he would have

knocked your teeth out if you insulted the Celtics, Red Sox or Mark Walberg in front of him. He was a stocky lad, pale skin, blonde Mohawk, blue eyes and a chin that jutted out from his face like it was carved straight from the Cliffs of Moher in Ireland. He said his pizza was “wicked good.” Anyway, the pizza was excellent. It had that wow factor: it was piping hot, not too greasy, the cheese slid around on top and the pizza was just plain old delicious!



The first time I strayed from pizza, I was let down. Spaghetti... I couldn't believe it. First of all, it should have been delicious because I was starving. My tummy started grumbling around 5 p.m., while I was at a little beach on the Arno. Unfortunately, I had to wait until after 10 p.m. to get my dinner! It took us forever to get to a restaurant, only to find it packed. So we found another, sat down and ordered. Well, something went wrong and they messed up the pasta or something, and it took twice as long to arrive before my starving eyes. The pasta itself was good but the sauce wasn't. It was alright, but didn't really taste like much.

Yesterday I ordered a caprice salad at a café. I did not receive such a dish. I got some other salad with chicken, mozzarella and raisins. It didn't have any dressing, which surprised me, but the lettuce was a welcome change from the carb-only diet I've enjoyed for the past week. The chicken was great; it was flavorful and tender, really quite brilliant.

So far, the best Italian dish I've had in Florence was the linguine I had for dinner last night. I actually made it myself, right here in our flat. It was done with Italian pasta and sauce, so I have no idea what kind of sauce it was—other than it was slightly sweet. I added red pepper flakes for that extra kick and it was unforgettable. I can safely say it was the most flavorful pasta I've ever made. Even mopping up the extra sauce after was grand.

I'm embarrassed to admit that I have tried the "1950s American Diner" that's right around the corner from my flat. I got a hamburger...it was salty and greasy. If my manager found I ate a hamburger in Italy, he'd probably fire me right on the spot; he actually called me out when I bought frozen pizzas from the grocery store the other day.

I also saw a building covered with spoons...

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