

DESTINATION ♦ ITALY

FAST FOOD

Eating out in Rome is a Piazza cake when you're on the back of a scooter

RENATA GORTAN



My arms are wrapped tightly around the waist of a guy I just met and I'm fighting the urge to close my eyes as he weaves his Vespa through multiple lanes of traffic on the packed streets circling Piazza Venezia.

Italian drivers seem to think of road markings as suggestions rather than rules, which explains the five cars travelling through three lanes. It must also be why no one bats an eyelid as we suddenly zip out from behind a Fiat to balance in the narrow gap between a van and a Mercedes-Benz, all in the name of beating Rome's notorious traffic.

Slowly, though, I learn to lean into the turn as we take a corner a little faster than the speed limit and my grip loosens as I get used to the bumpy rhythm of riding on cobblestone roads, so that by the end only one arm hangs on as the other takes photos. It seems as though the cavalier Italian attitude to road rules is contagious.

The Vespa belongs to Michele Bartolini, a born-and-bred Roman who's showing me the sights on a Scooteroma food tour of the Eternal City.

A decade after first coming to Rome, I'm back and want to see the city from a new vantage point. As a backpacker who once stood dazed before the pedestrian crossings at Piazza Venezia, too scared to step out in front of cars that didn't slow down, it's thrilling to be zipping past

tentative tourists who haven't yet learnt the secret to crossing Italian streets – to move forward and let the traffic flow around you. It's a remarkably effective strategy once you get over the fear of being run over.

Although Rome is a great walking city, with most of the main monuments within a 20-minute stroll of one another, the advantage of riding shotgun on the back of a scooter is that you get to see more of it.

Michele picks me up from my accommodation in Trastevere and takes me across the Tiber to Esquilino, the neighbourhood near Termini station, and past Santa Maria Maggiore for our first stop at Panella.

This pasticceria was established in 1929 and is one of the oldest bakeries in Rome. Breakfast in Italy is a simple affair, usually coffee and a pastry. While it's acceptable to order a cappuccino up until 10am, swap it for the house specialty, cafe con la crema. Instead of milk, your espresso is topped with zabaglione, whipped eggs and sugar, making for a sweet, creamy kickstart to the day.

Every Italian city has its signature breakfast pastry and in Rome it's marituzzo con la panna, an oval brioche filled with lashings of cream. Traditionally, a man would hide a present for his lover in the cream and she would show her affection by calling him her "marituzzo," which came from the Italian word for husband, "marito".

We hop back on and head south, past the Circus Maximus where Michele stops to recount its bloody

THE ABATTOIR IS THE INSPIRATION BEHIND MODERN ROMAN COOKING

history, and arrive in Testaccio, a once poor and now-hip Roman neighbourhood. A 10-minute drive from the centre of Rome, it was home to an abattoir until the '60s. Now

repurposed as MACRO, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome, the buildings are still connected with the tracks and hooks that transported carcasses from one building to another.

The abattoir is said to be the inspiration behind modern Roman cooking. Its poor workers lived in the surrounding housing projects and they would get the leftovers, the offal that no one else wanted and so found ways to make it taste good. It's why you'll see the quinto quarto – fifth quarter of the animal – on menus all over Rome, the most popular being tripe alla Romana, with tomato sauce, mint and pecorino. For those who

aren't adventurous enough to dive into a big, intimidating bowl of offal but want to taste it, it's more palatable when wedged between bread. Testaccio's market is home to street food vendors such as Mordie Vai, who serve tripe, oxtail and meatballs in a panino. Or try nearby Trapizzino, where delicacies including tongue and salsa verde are stuffed in bread triangles that are the love child of a tramezzino, bread sandwich and pizza base.

A benefit of my private tour is that Michele takes requests. I want porchetta, the Roman specialty of whole stuffed and roasted pork, but it's not a scheduled stop so I swap the

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