

Italy



For an excellent food and travel portal, visit www.deliciousitaly.com; it also lists courses and wine tours.

Having said that, most eating establishments do serve a good selection of antipasti (starters) and *contorni* (vegetables prepared in a variety of ways), and the further south you go, the better the vegetable dishes get. Look for the word *magro* (thin or lean) on menus, which usually means that the dish is meatless. Vegans are in for a much tougher time. Cheese is used universally, so you have to say *senza formaggio* (without cheese).

COOKING COURSES

There are hundreds of cooking and wine-tasting courses in Italy.

Casa Ombuto (www.italiancookingcourse.com) High on the hills of the Casentino valley in Tuscany stands Casa Ombuto. Seven-day courses are run by inspiring tutors in this cave-like *cucina* (kitchen).

International Wine Academy of Roma (Map pp98-9; ☎ 06 699 08 78; www.wineacademyroma.com; Vicolo del Bottino 8) Runs various wine courses. For a half-day introduction to Italy's major wine regions, the variety of grapes grown and tasting techniques expect to pay €150. Three-day courses cost about €550 and include a vineyard visit.

La Cucina del Garga (☎ 055 21 13 96; www.garga.it) Hands-on Tuscan cookery courses, from one to eight days, run by the team from Trattoria Garga (p482) in Florence.

Menfi (www.tastingplaces.com) Published cookery writer Maxine Clark hosts a week-long course in the 18th-century Villa Ravida in Menfi, Sicily. The course is an exploration of the earthy and exotic mix of Sicilian food. Tasting Places also offers courses in Tuscany, Umbria and the Veneto.

EATING WITH KIDS

You'll be hard-pressed to find a children's menu in most Italian restaurants. It's not that kids are not welcome but because, more than anywhere, they are. Local children are treated very much as adults and are taken out to dinner from a very young age. You'll often see families order a *mezzo piatto* (half-plate) off the menu for their smaller members. Virtually all restaurants are perfectly comfortable tailoring a dish to meet your kid's tastes.

High chairs are available in many restaurants, but it would be a lot safer to bring one along if you can. While children are often taken out, and the owner's kids may be seen scrambling about the room, it's expected that kids are well behaved, and disciplined if they are not.

For more information on travelling with your little ones, see p857.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Italians will rarely eat a sit-down *colazione* (breakfast) – they tend to drink a cappuccino and eat a pastry while standing at a bar.

Pranzo (lunch) is traditionally the main meal of the day and many shops and businesses close for three to four hours every afternoon for the meal and the siesta that is traditionally supposed to follow. A full meal will consist of an antipasto, which can vary from bruschetta to fried vegetables or *prosciutto e melone* (cured ham wrapped around melon). Next comes the *primo piatto* (first course), a pasta or risotto, followed by the *secondo piatto* (second course) of meat or fish. Italians often then eat an *insalata* (salad) or *contorno* (vegetable side dish) and round off the meal with fruit, or occasionally with *dolci* (sweets) and coffee.

Cena, the evening meal, was traditionally a more simple affair, but in recent years habits have been changing because of the inconvenience of travelling home for lunch every day.

In general, Italians are not big snackers, although it is not uncommon for them to have a quick bite – usually a *tramezzino* (sandwich), *merendina* (cake or biscuit) or slice of pizza – halfway through the morning or afternoon.