

WHEN IN ROME

Travel and food writer **Brett Atkinson** explores the up and coming Roman neighbourhood of Testaccio, where the city's traditional flavours are given a modern spin.

Photography by **Carol Atkinson**

A WASH WITH TRADITION AND heritage, and casually studded with historic structures spanning almost three millennia, Rome can feel like a city living on past glories. Many restaurants around the city's tourist hubs offer lookalike menus with classic Roman dishes like *cacio e pepe* (pasta served with cheese and pepper), or *conia di gelato*, which goes for about AU\$6 around the Colosseum and Spanish Steps.

But just one metro stop south of the ancient world's most impressive stadium, chefs in an emerging neighbourhood are reinterpreting the city's culinary traditions with a contemporary attitude. Prices are lower, the flavours are bigger, and there's a good chance the refreshing *limone* ice-cream on offer is crafted from citrus fruit foraged directly from local orchards.

On the River Tiber's southeastern bank, grittily authentic Testaccio has long been a proud Roman working class neighbourhood. Over a century ago, the area housed Europe's biggest slaughterhouse, and many of the abattoir's lower-paid workers – dubbed *la vaccinara* – were gifted the *quinto quarto* (fifth quarter) of the cow and pig parts that no-one else wanted. Tripe, oxtail and other offal were incorporated into traditional Roman cuisine, and now Testaccio's eateries and market stalls are resurrecting these classic ingredients with a modern twist.

The Trapizzino empire incorporates two stores in New York, but the original Testaccio location is still the best. After merging the triangular shape of traditional *tramezzino* sandwiches



with pizza dough, Roman chef Stefano Callegari crafted hearty fillings to accompany his pillowy pockets of fluffy *pizza bianca*. New wave fillings include Ethiopian-style *zighini* (beef stew), but the flavours from the days of *la vaccinara* are the most popular with Trapizzino's loyal regulars. Washed down with craft beers from Italy's Baladin Brewery, *tramezzino* crammed with tender oxtail or tripe with tomato, pecorino cheese and mint, are regularly devoured by revellers overflowing from Testaccio's late-night clubs and bars.

For an essential daytime eatery, Mercado Testaccio delivers. Fruit and produce vendors sit between stalls, selling some of the area's best street food, where chefs channel the market's historic roots in their reinvented Roman cuisine. If you dig a little deeper, you'll also find some of Rome's best Sicilian flavours.

There's more sandwich action at Morde & Vai with panini crammed with an ever-changing range of fillings. Mainstream flavours include spicy *salsiccia* sausage or *polpette* meatballs in a rich tomato sauce, both best enjoyed when the hearty fillings soak through Morde & Vai's crisp ciabatta buns. Traditional *cucina Romana* is expressed through more challenging fillings like *coratella e carciofi* (a robust mix of heart, lung and artichoke) and the classic flavours of *trippa alla Romana* (Roman-style tripe) are cooked slowly to a creamy texture capable of converting even the most ardent of tripe sceptics.

Elsewhere in the market, it's Rome's classic

pizza alla palla that receives a contemporary makeover. Traditionally baked in a rectangular shape, cut off in slabs and sold by weight, CasaManco's versions, crafted by husband and wife team Andrea Salabe and Paola Manco, have assumed cult status in Rome since they launched in 2017. Served on rustic wooden platters and more akin to a crispy-based flatbread, traditional combinations like prosciutto and fig or anchovy and zucchini flowers are joined by the elaborate, but balanced blend of mortadella sausage, ricotta cheese, Sicilian blood orange and honey. Fruity sparkling prosecco wine is available at an adjacent stall for just AU\$3 a glass, and the Sicilian theme is reinforced nearby at Emporio di Sicilia's market counter overflowing with the best of flavours from Italy's most southern province.

Deliciously bitter chocolate from the Sicilian town of Modica partners with crisp cannoli pastries dusted with reputedly the world's finest pistachios from the town of Bronte, while some of Rome's best arancini are arrayed carefully in neat rows. Infused with saffron and often filled with *melanzane* (eggplant) or a meaty ragu sauce, Sicily's signature rice balls are a culinary legacy of 175 years of Arab rule in the ninth century. Served warm and crunchy and teamed with a zingy glass of cola-like *chinotto*, they're yet another tasty contender for the title of Rome's best 21st Century street snack. ☒



ARANCINI

INGREDIENTS

500ml water
300g Arborio rice
50g parmesan cheese
1 tbsp saffron
1 tbsp Italian parsley
2 tbsp butter
2 eggs
salt and pepper
100g chopped mozzarella cheese
2 tbsp flour
4 tbsp breadcrumbs
1 tbsp peas
1 tbsp chopped pistachios
oil for frying
Makes 8-10 for 4 people.

METHOD

1. Combine the rice and the water in a pan. Add a pinch of salt for seasoning, then bring to a boil and cook slowly over a very low heat. Make sure you stir frequently until all the water has been absorbed.
2. After dissolving the saffron in hot water, stir into the rice along with grated parmesan cheese and finely chopped Italian parsley.
3. Once this mixture has cooled slightly stir in the butter and one egg.
4. Beat the remaining egg and season with salt and pepper.
5. When the rice mixture has cooled further, form into 8-10 balls around the size of a mandarin. Keeping your hands wet will prevent the rice from sticking.
6. Form a small depression in the middle of the ball and carefully place a small amount of the mozzarella, peas and pistachios.
7. Seal the opening, dust the rice balls with flour, and then roll in egg and breadcrumbs.
8. Heat the oil and fry them a few at a time until golden. Drain on paper before serving. *Buon appetito!*

