



VEGETARIAN ITALIA

WITH ABUNDANT FRESH PRODUCE AND A PASSIONATE CULINARY HISTORY, ITALY WOULD SEEM A NATURAL CHOICE FOR THOSE OF THE VEGETARIAN PERSUASION. THANKS TO A HANDFUL OF PIONEERING ESTABLISHMENTS, VEGETARIANISM IS GOING GOURMET IN THE LAND OF PASTA AND BRUSCHETTA, OFFERING A KINDER, GENTLER, MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY DIET

WORDS | JESSICA GLIDDON



The Montali Country House lies nestled in the plump heart of Italy's Umbrian countryside, flanked by rolling hills laden with olive trees. From the sun-dappled stone porch, birdsong echoes through the trees. On a distant hill, a ruined stone castle stands between the olive groves. The scene could hardly be more quaint, hardly more Italian and hardly a better setting for a gourmet country restaurant.

At this small hotel just outside Perugia, it's all about what grows in these hills. Wild animals run free without fear, safe from the prospect of becoming traditional Umbrian sausage. This is because Montali is not only a guesthouse, but also one of Italy's first and most important vegetarian establishments.

Mushroom risotto; penne arrabiata; spaghetti pomodoro – Italian cuisine has always had a large range of vegetarian dishes. Italy's culinary heritage involves a passionate

love for the freshness of its produce. This passion has given rise to groups like the organic and sustainable Slow Food movement – increasing interest in the vegetarian diet for its kinder environmental impact. According to Italian non-profit think tank Eurispes, ten percent of Italians are vegetarian, making Italy one of the most vegetarian-friendly countries in Europe. Despite that, it is still a minority culinary pastime.

"Italians are too traditional and conservative," begins Alberto Musacchio, the owner of Montali. "Thirty years ago everyone said I was ten years ahead of my time. Things haven't changed. The majority of our guests are English, Dutch and American. Half our guests are vegetarian. Many people are scared to eat vegetarian, but they love the food when they try it. If you're vegetarian in Italy you will eat a lot of carbohydrates. The *secondo* is always meat; but still Italy is easier than Spain or France."

The climate that has made Italy vegetarian-friendly has less to do with ethics than the historic economic and physical setting of the country – Italy was very poor in the past. Rich soils and a Mediterranean climate have ⇒

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The Umbrian countryside; tasty vegetarianism; the Montali restaurant

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Joia serves up excellent vegetarian fare; Alberto Musacchio and his wife Malu



"If we want to use less energy we must be vegetarian, if we want to respect the planet we must be vegetarian."

always meant vegetables were plentiful and cheap, while meat was more precious. "If you think of farm life, raising an animal is not easy," Alberto explains. "Animals are big things to kill. Also Italy is a hot country and it's not easy to preserve the meat. So people were inspired to cook more vegetables."

Alberto, who is vegetarian for ethical reasons, started the Montali Hotel 25 years ago with his Brazilian wife Malu out of a shared passion for vegetarian cuisine and a secluded life. They bought a ruined stone house in the rambling Umbrian countryside that had been abandoned for fourteen years, and used Malu's knowledge as a restorative architect to fix it up. "The location was fabulous, but it was a jungle," he says. "Now we've had it for more than twenty years."

Malu is Montali's chef, responsible for such gastronomic creations as the sweet and tangy crudite di pere e melone, a pear and melon salad with Italy's exclusive Castelmagno cheese, glazed with a balsamic vinaigrette and honey. There is a divine truffle and sundried tomato starter, and an array of interpretations of perfectly executed pasta dishes.

"There are a lot of preconceptions about vegetarians; they expect us to be hippies with long hair feeding on pulses and lentils," says Alberto. Montali strives to show the chic side of vegetarianism. "I call our cuisine 'sexy vegetarian'. A few years ago a German publication misinterpreted that and wrote that I was 'Alberto: the sexy vegetarian'," he

laughs. "Our cuisine is vegetarian to a higher standard. It is Mediterranean cuisine made vegetarian, with a typical Italian approach. A lot of vegetarian restaurants serve one big main dish: this is what I call fusion confusion. I prefer to have small courses, as in traditional Italian food. You need to have three to four top quality ingredients and keep the identity of the food. If you have truffle, you need to taste it."

Strangely enough, vegetarian preparation is actually more time consuming than the meat variety. "Why don't more people serve vegetarian food? It's hard work," says Alberto. "We have four chefs, they start at 7.30 in the morning. It's time consuming – it requires more preparation, peeling and chopping the vegetables. With meat, you can just stick it in the oven. Many restaurants don't use fresh vegetables. We are one of the few places to use fresh spinach; most restaurants use frozen. Everything in our restaurant is fresh and homemade."

To cook vegetarian in a gourmet fashion is one thing: to receive acknowledgement from the gourmet institution of Michelin is quite another. While Alberto is dismissive of approval from Michelin, Italian vegetarian gourmet restaurateur Pietro Leeman is proud of his star. "To get a star in vegetarian cuisine is more difficult," he says. "All the gourmet tradition is based on meat, so it is difficult to feel the quality with vegetarian cuisine. But Michelin is changing because people are changing. We hope to get another star."

Leeman's sophisticated Milan eatery Joia was the first vegetarian establishment in Europe to please the dignified French guide, earning its first star in 1996. The restaurant's Swiss-born founder and chef is an adamant believer in bringing vegetarianism into the gourmet world. "Vegetarianism is the future," he says. "In Italy, everybody is going towards a more natural cuisine. Even if they eat a little bit of meat, they are eating more vegetables and fruit: the diet is changing."

Leeman's own personal reasons for going veggie include health, ethics and environmentalism. "Vegetarian food is more healthy," he says. "Most importantly, I don't like to kill animals and I don't agree with keeping animals to kill them. Here in Europe we have many places where we have an incredible amount of animals forced together. They live a sad life. Vegetarian cuisine is also better for the planet because you need less food to nourish more people and also the style of growing vegetables is not such a problem for pollution. If we want to use less energy we must be vegetarian, if we want to respect the planet we must be vegetarian."

Interestingly, both Joia and Montali have been influenced by Asia – in fact neither of their chefs are even Italian, with Leeman being Swiss and Malu being Brazilian. Montali's first chef was Japanese, and Alberto has spent much time in India and Vietnam – similarly, Leeman has spent much time travelling around the vegetarian-friendly continent. "In Asia the people live in a natural way," says Leeman. "There I understood vegetarian cuisine was my life and I became definitely a vegetarian. Also I studied their style of vegetable cooking. My cuisine is a European Italian style, but I also use tofu and ginger."

Alberto makes no attempts to indoctrinate anyone into his eating lifestyle, but he says that if there is a way to convert people it is not through words, but through food. Leeman agrees. "To convince the people to eat less meat, it must be very tasty," he says. "We work a lot on the quality of ingredients but also the transformation of ingredients. Normally vegetarian restaurants are healthy but not tasty. Joia is both. The style of my cuisine is Italian in taste, and an expression of my ideas. I want to make people feel better, not only in body, but for the mind and the spirit. This is in some way the feel of Italian cuisine. We give good energy to the cooking." 🍴