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Gastronomer's Guide to the regions of Italy

Italy is made up of 20 regions, each with a distinct cuisine. Here's some top picks to enjoy right here in New York

By CLAUDIA SIDOTI

1 FRIULI-VENEZIA-GIULIA

This region shares borders with Austria and Slovenia, and features beautiful Adriatic beaches, stunning mountain views and pastoral vineyards.

It's one of Italy's greatest white wine regions as well as the home of a fine Italian coffee producer, **Ily Coffee**. Ily Coffee was founded in Trieste, Italy in 1933 and is a single blend of the finest 100 percent Arabica beans, roasted and air-cooled, then packaged in an air-free pressurized environment.

You can get a taste of Italy every morning with a cup of freshly ground **Ily coffee Caffè in Grani**, \$12.95, available from D'Agostino Supermarkets, Williams Sonoma and Bed, Bath & Beyond.

If you really want to immerse yourself, check out the **Galleria Ily** at 382 West Broadway (www.ilyusa.com) which is also a wonderful place to discover artwork by leading artists like James Rosenquist and Julian Schnabel.

A calendar of events include coffee discussions with food guru David Rosengarten as well as coffee education courses.

For those who prefer wine, this region of Italy is also home to the full, lush style of pinot grigio.

Pierpaolo Pecorari Pinot Grigio, \$16.29, has a richness that comes from perfectly ripe grapes with luscious ripe pear aromas.

It's available at Italian Wine Merchant, 108 E. 16th St. (212) 473-2323; www.italianwinemerchant.com or The Wine Shop, 1585 1st Ave. (212) 517-2550; www.wineshopny.com

2 LOMBARDIA

Because Lombardia is nestled between the northern Alps and the southern Po river, it has some of Italy's most beautiful and varied terrain.

It's a complex region when it comes to food, but there are some common traits: meat is braised (Austrian influence); green vegetables are not a traditional food, and butter is the primary cooking fat.

To the wealthy landowners we owe risotto, the star of the Lombardian menu.



Galleria Ily offers a great cup of Italian Joe.

J. Scott Wynn

Soups were a large part of the farmer's life, and to them we owe minestrone.

Polenta, a hearty corn dish, was also traditionally eaten by laborers, as there was little meat available.

Sala Cercall Polenta e Funghi Lombardia, \$14.59, is a glorious combination of stone ground polenta with the distinctively rich and hearty flavor of porcini mushrooms.

Imported by A.G. Ferrara foods, it comes from a small, family-owned mill in Lombardia, in operation since 1906 and run by brothers Giancarlo and Paolo Sala.

They use slow, traditional machinery without heat or chemical extraction. All of their grains are stone ground.

Shop for it online at www.agferrari.com or call (877) 878-2783

3 EMILIA-ROMAGNA

The gastronomic heartland of Italy, this passionate countryside produces homemade pasta, prosciutto and parmigiano without equal.

The region's capital is Bologna, and draws characteristics from both Emilia and Romagna. The foods of both regions are robust, and it's the motherland of homemade pasta.

Another of Emilia-Romagna's great culinary contributions is balsamic vinegar, which has been made in Modena for centuries.

Giusti Aged Balsamic Vinegar (\$16) is aged for six

years in barrels, each made from a different wood, by the Giusti family, who has produced their vinegars in the same building since 1605.

Older, concentrated balsamics like these are reserved for drizzling over grilled steaks, sautéed chicken breasts or a wedge of Parmigiano-Reggiano

cheese. They are so wonderfully sweet you can even try it over sliced strawberries and vanilla ice cream.

Available exclusively at William Sonoma stores and www.williamsonoma.com.

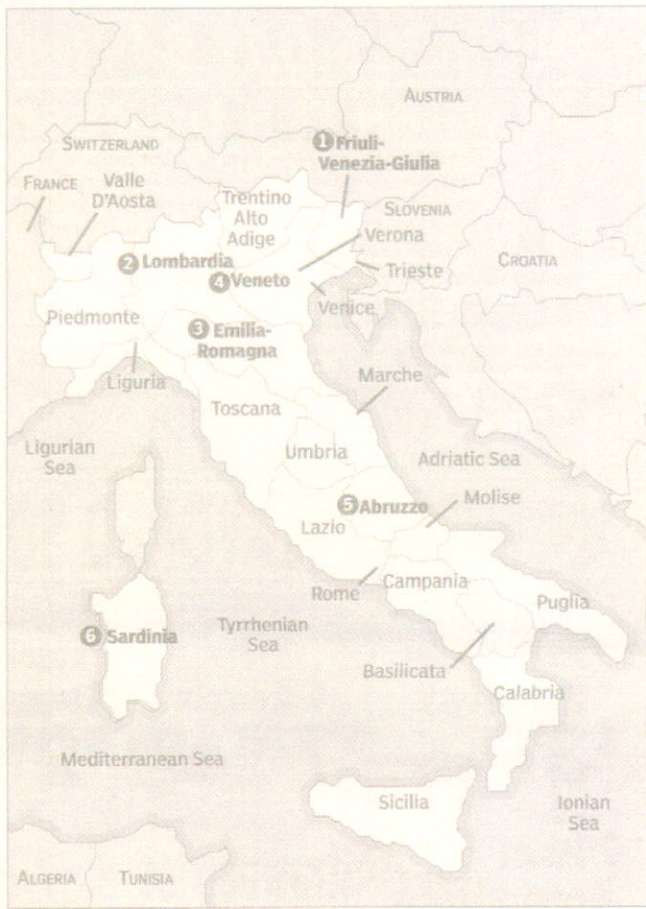
4 VENETO

Venice dominates this region and it's easy to forget what lies beyond this beautiful and romantic city.

The region covers a stretch of land between the Alps, the Dolomites, and the Gulf of Venice; a tiny piece of it touches Austria. The Venetians popularized rice and created an array of risottos made with almost everything the countryside has to offer.

Two varieties of rice are deemed by Venetian cooks to make the best risotto: **Vialone Nano** and **Carnaroli**.

Riserva Ferron Riso Carnaroli Veneto (\$10.99) and **Riso Superfino Carnaroli Rice** (\$10.99) comes from Gabriele Ferron, the widely-acclaimed king of rice, presiding over a small area on the shores of the Po river just south of Verona.



Map by Thomas Holmes

There, he grows the finest organic rices, milled using both ancient and modern techniques.

Carnaroli rice grows nearly twice as tall as either Arborio or Vialone Nano, making it extremely difficult to harvest. It also plumps to three times its size when cooked, absorbing a staggering amount of liquid along the way.

The resulting texture is creamy, yet still al dente. It is also as white as snow, resulting in a dazzling plate of risotto. The large, long grain also makes it a good choice for rice salad.

Available online at www.agferrari.com or call (877) 878-2783.

5 ABRUZZO

A mountainous region with dramatic drops to the sea, the Abruzzo region is also home to some marvelous artisan pasta makers

because the durum wheat flourishes in the salty breezes from the Adriatic.

Rustichella d' Abruzzo pasta is made by artisan pasta maker Gianluigi Peduzzi, and maintains the proud Rustichella d'Abruzzo tradition started by his grandfather in the 1900s. Rustichella d'Abruzzo pasta is air dried for a crucial 56 hours, which produces a dense, flavorful pasta that cooks perfectly al dente. The line boasts more than 50 different shapes and varieties. Bags are 11 pounds and cost \$7.50 from Bellavita restaurant at 24 Minetta Lane (212) 473-5121 (see page 66) or online at www.cyberocin.com.

Produced under the guidance of Giorgio himself, this oil is made with Bosana olives that are pressed within a few hours of picking, ensuring the oil's quality and freshness.

6 SARDINIA

Isolated from the rest of Italy and Europe, Sardinia is the second largest island in the Mediterranean, with two distinct cuisines: coastal and inland.

The coastal cuisine was influenced by invaders, who brought seafood, including lobster, here elsewhere in Italy. Traditional Sardinian

dishes are not seafood-based at all. Instead, they lean heavily on milk, cheese, roasted meat, and bread.

Sardinia also produces top quality olive oil as well.

Giorgio Zampa Extra Virgin Olive Oil Sardegna (\$32.99) is an extra virgin olive oil made at Giorgio's farm in Cagliari, in the hills at the foot of Montiferru.

Produced under the guidance of Giorgio himself, this oil is made with Bosana olives that are pressed within a few hours of picking, ensuring the oil's quality and freshness.

This oil is first cold pressed and has a soft mellow flavor with a peppery after taste. Available online at www.agferrari.com or call (877) 878-2783.



For fine regional dining in NYC, turn to page 66