

FORMAL ITALIAN EVENING

Pasto - This is the term for "meal" in Italy. Meals at home are very important and the average Italian rarely goes out to eat. Most children still come home for lunch as do most working family members.

Midday Meal - Pranzo

This is the most important meal of the day. It takes place between about 12:30 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. In the north it is earlier, while in Rome it is later. Sometimes this meal is referred to as "colazione." In the past, pranzi for the leisure class were made up of many dishes, with at least four courses, after which candied fruit and other sweets were served. When the fresh fruit was brought out, it signaled the end of the meal. Music was always played before the fruit collation, and then played again at the very end of the meal. Today a home-style midday meal usually consists of two courses, a cheese, and fruit. Both courses are equally important. Traditionally, soups are never served at mid-day; instead a risotto or a pasta dish is more likely. There is a second course, usually meat or fish, often accompanied by a vegetable.

Dinner - Cena

In Italy dinner takes place from between 7:30 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. in the north. In the south and in Rome, it is served much later; it is not unusual to dine as late as 10:00 p.m. there. Dinner usually begins with a pasta or a soup and is followed by a single course, an omelet or a vegetable dish for example. The meal ends with coffee, cheese, and fruit.

Contorno - When vegetables are served on the same plate with the meat, poultry, or fish, this is referred to as "contorno." Usually one vegetable is served on the plate and never more than two. Pasta, salad, and rice are not referred to as "contorno."

Piatto - The term "piatto" refers to both a "plate" and a "course." A home-cooked meal usually consists of a "primo piatto" and a "secondo piatto." A one course meal is a "piatto unico." Meals are served from a large dish which is passed around to each diner. Dishes, except for some antipastos or desserts, are usually never placed on individual plates.

Formal meals, or special occasion meals, consist of four courses: a first course, two second courses, and a sweet. A four course meal does not automatically mean more food but rather, smaller portions.

It is not polite for a guest to bring wine along to a formal dinner in Italy, as this casts aspersions on your host's inability to provide suitable spirits.

Pasta is never cut, but is twirled on a fork and then eaten.

Forks are placed parallel to knives, tines down, to indicate that you are finished eating.

Espresso is always served after a meal, no matter how late the meal is served. Cappucino is the morning beverage of choice for Italians, and is never taken at lunch or dinner.

In Italy, it is considered a misfortune to eat alone. Italians like to eat in groups, and it is common for families to eat together and for guests to show up for meals.