

≡ Italian meal structure

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*"Primi" redirects here. For an ethnic group in Tibet, see Pumi people.*  
*"Contorno" redirects here. For other uses, see Contorno (disambiguation).*

**Italian meal structure** is typical of the **European Mediterranean** region and differs from that of Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe, although it still often consists of **breakfast** (*colazione*), **lunch** (*pranzo*), and **supper** (*cena*).<sup>[1]</sup> However, breakfast itself is often skipped or is lighter than that of non-Mediterranean Europe.<sup>[2]</sup> Late-morning and mid-afternoon snacks, called *merenda* (pl.: *merende*), are also often eaten.<sup>[3]</sup>

Full meals in Italy contain four or five courses.<sup>[4]</sup> Especially on weekends, meals are often seen as a time to spend with family and friends rather than simply for sustenance; thus, meals tend to be longer than elsewhere. During holidays such as Christmas and New Year's Eve, feasts can last for hours.<sup>[5]</sup>

Today, full-course meals are mainly reserved for special events such as [weddings](#), while everyday meals include only a first or second course (sometimes both), a [side dish](#), and coffee.<sup>[6][7]</sup> The *primo* (first course) is usually a filling dish such as risotto or pasta, with sauces made from meat, vegetables, or seafood.<sup>[8]</sup> Whole pieces of meat such as sausages, meatballs, and poultry are eaten in the *secondo* (second course).<sup>[9]</sup> Italian cuisine has some single-course meals (*piatto unico*) combining starches and proteins.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Daytime meal structure [\[edit\]](#)

**Breakfast (colazione)** [ [edit](#) ]

The most popular **breakfast** (*colazione*) is sweet, consumed at home or at a café. If the breakfast is consumed at home, it consists of **coffee** (*espresso* or prepared with a **moka pot**), milk, or **café latte** accompanied by baked goods such as **biscuits**, for example **shortbread**, or by slices of **bread** spread with **butter** and **jam** or with **honey** or **gianduja** cream, made with chocolate and hazelnuts. Milk is sometimes replaced by fruit juice.<sup>[11][12]</sup> On some special occasions, such as Sundays or holidays, there may also be more baked goods, such as **cakes**, **pies**, **pastries**, or other regional specialties.

If breakfast is consumed at a cafe, espresso coffee predominates, together with *cappuccino* or *latte macchiato*, accompanied by a *cornetto*, *bombolone*, or other pastry;<sup>[13]</sup> however, the choice of breakfast desserts is varied, some of which are often present in certain regions or cities. In recent decades, other types of coffee drinks have also spread, such as *mocaccino* and *marocchino*.<sup>[14][15]</sup>

Much less frequent, but not completely unusual, is the savory breakfast (although much lighter and frugal than other European savory breakfasts), often consisting of *focaccia* (of different types and depending on the region) or even just toasted homemade bread seasoned with extra virgin olive oil, tomato, or sliced *salami*.<sup>[16]</sup>

However, many Italians only drink coffee for breakfast and no food.<sup>[17]</sup>

**Lunch (*pranzo*)** [\[ edit \]](#)

Lunch (*pranzo*) is generally considered the most important meal of the day. The full version is composed of four courses:<sup>[18][19]</sup>

- a first course (*primo*), usually a dish based on *pasta, risotto, rice, polenta, legumes, or a soup*;<sup>[20][21][22]</sup>
- a second course (*secondo*), based on *meat, fish, dairy products such as cheese, or eggs*;<sup>[23][24][25]</sup>
- a side dish (*contorno*) of raw or cooked vegetables, which accompanies the second dish;
- seasonal fruit (*frutta*) as a conclusion.

Lunch is always served with bread.

Meals, particularly lunch, are generally concluded with a cup of espresso or coffee prepared with a *caffè moka*, sometimes followed by the so-called *ammazzacaffè*, consisting of a glass of local liqueur, bitter or sweet (of which there is wide choice).<sup>[26][27]</sup>

On special occasions, such as holidays and anniversaries, there are also two other courses:

- an **appetizer** (**antipasto**); cold or hot, it is the least abundant course, and is generally composed of **crostini**, **bruschetta**, **salami** and/or **sausages**, **cheeses** and/or dairy products, cooked and/or raw **vegetables**, or preparations based on **seafood**;<sup>[28][29]</sup>
- a **dessert** (**dolce**) to finish;<sup>[30][31]</sup>

Wine is often a part of the meal, especially during lunch and dinner.<sup>[32][33]</sup>

**Mid-afternoon snack (*merenda*)** [\[ edit \]](#)

*See also: Merienda*

A *merenda* (from the Latin *merenda*) is a snack in the mid-morning (around 10 o'clock a.m.) or mid-afternoon (around 5 o'clock p.m.). It is usually a light meal, consisting of a *panini* or *tramezzino*, fruit alone, or bread and jam, if not a dessert and, in summer, possibly gelato. It is common for children, and also eaten by adults. <sup>[34]</sup>

**Supper (*cena*)** [ [edit](#) ]

Supper is the other main meal of the day. The supper (*cena*) scheme has the same courses as lunch, but with dishes and foods that are usually lighter.<sup>[35][36]</sup>

Exceptions are richer dinners (*cenoni*) eaten for festivities such as New Year's Eve, Christmas Eve and the Carnival period.<sup>[37][38]</sup>

Unlike lunch, supper, when consumed among close family members, does not necessarily include a first course based on **starchy foods** (such as **pasta** or **polenta**) or **cereals** (such as **rice**), so sometimes supper consists of the equivalent of a second course (a **meat** or **fish-based preparation**) with or without a **side dish**, or a **single dish**, such as a **sausage** or a **light soup**, and including **bread**. [14][39][40]



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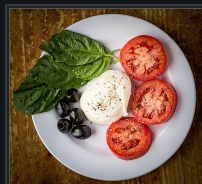
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V T I



A cup of **cappuccino** and **cornetti** at breakfast (*colazione*)



An *insalata caprese*, a cold dish which might be consumed at a lunch in Italy during the hot summer



A classic panini with salami for the merenda

or non-based preparatory), with or without a *side dish*, or a single dish, such as a *soup* or a *light soup*, and including *bread*.

## Formal meal structure [ edit ]

A structure of an Italian meal in its full form, usually used during festivities.<sup>[4][41]</sup>

### Aperitivo

the **aperitivo** opens a meal, and it is similar to an appetizer. Most people gather around standing up and have alcoholic/non-alcoholic drinks such as wine, prosecco, spritz, vermouth, and *gingerino*. Occasionally small amounts of food are consumed, such as olives, crisps, nuts, cheese, sauce dips, little quiches or similar snacks.

### Antipasto

the **antipasto** is a slightly heavier starter. It is usually cold and lighter than the first course. Examples of foods eaten are *salumi* (such as *salami*, *mortadella*, *prosciutto*, *bresaola*, and other charcuterie products), cheeses, sandwich-like foods (*panini* and *tramezzino*), marinated vegetables or fish, cold salmon or prawn *cocktails*; more elaborate dishes are occasionally prepared.

### Primo

a *primo* is the first course. It consists of hot food and is usually heavier than the antipasto, but lighter than the second course. Non-meat dishes are the staple of any *primo piatto*: examples are risotto, pasta, seafood or vegetarian sauces, soup and broth, gnocchi, polenta, *crespelle*, casseroles, or lasagne.

### Secondo

this course may include different meats and types of fish, including turkey, sausage, pork, steak, stew, beef, *zampone*, salt cod, stockfish, salmon, lobster, lamb, chicken, or a roast. The *primo* or the *secondo piatto* may be considered more important depending on the locality and the situation.

### Contorno

*"Contorno" redirects here. For the barrio in Puerto Rico, see Contorno, Toa Alta, Puerto Rico. For the Hannibal episode, see Contorno (Hannibal).*

A contorno is a *side dish* and is commonly served alongside a *secondo piatto*. These usually consist of vegetables, raw or cooked, hot or cold. They are usually served on a separate dish, not on the same plate as the meat as in Northern European style of presentation.

### Insalata

if the contorno contained many leafy vegetables, the salad might be omitted. Otherwise, a fresh garden salad could be served at this point.

### Formaggi e frutta

an entire course is dedicated to local cheeses and fresh seasonal fruit. The cheeses will be whatever is typical of the region (see List of Italian cheeses).

### Dolce

next follows the dolce, or dessert. Frequent dishes include tiramisu, panna cotta, cake or pie, panettone or *pandoro* (the last two are mainly served at Christmas time) and the *colomba pasquale* (an Easter cake). A gelato or a *sorbetto* can be eaten too. Although there are nationwide desserts, popular across Italy, many regions and cities have local specialties. In Naples, for instance, *zeppole* and *rum baba* are popular; in Sicily, cassata and cannoli are commonly consumed; *mostarda*, on the other hand, is more of a northern dish.

### Caffè

coffee is often drunk at the end of a meal, even after the *digestivo*. Italians do not have milky coffees or drinks after meals (such as cappuccino or *caffè macchiato*), but strong coffee such as espresso, which is often drunk very quickly in small cups while still hot.

### Digestivo

the *digestivo*, also called *ammazzacaffè* if served after the coffee, is the drink to conclude the meal. Drinks such as grappa, amaro, limoncello or other fruit/herbal drinks are drunk. *Digestivo* indicates that the drinks served at this time are meant to ease digestion of a long meal.

## See also [ edit ]

- Italian cuisine
- List of Italian foods and drinks
- Full-course dinner

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