



Q&A

# “Italian nonnas have all the answers”



YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE NOTICED, BUT **SUPERCHEF JAMIE OLIVER REALLY LOVES ITALY**. FOR HIS NEW BOOK HE TRAVELLED THE COUNTRY FROM TOP TO TOE – HERE’S WHAT HE LEARNED

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ith a fame so bright his first name alone is recognisable – like Jarvis or Jesus – Jamie is the English chef

so ubiquitous you’d swear there were a few of him knocking about. If he’s not cooking on telly – which he has been since his 1999 show *The Naked Chef* – he’s running his restaurants or campaigning against childhood obesity.

For his new book, *Jamie Cooks Italy*, he met the real food experts: not chefs, but grandmothers with lifetimes of cooking behind them. The result is a collection of recipes that evoke the magic of Italy from every region. The Essex Italophile tells us why he loves *la dolce vita*.

**Would your career have developed differently if your first chef job wasn’t in an Italian restaurant?**

“Really good question – and I don’t know. I was trained in classical French cooking and worked with some great French chefs. I even had the pleasure of working in a South Indian restaurant, but Italy drew me in because of its simplicity. I love the way Italian food makes people feel. It’s comforting, fun, relaxed.”

**Does being English let you look at Italian food in a unique way?**

“Maybe the fact I don’t live in Italy gives me a different perspective – I see snapshots of how the cooking is evolving every time I visit. I had to write this book because I felt the current generation of *nonnas* [grannies] are the last to have the

experience of being lifelong cooks, without modern conveniences. I was convinced they would have really important lessons for us.”

**Why do we all love Italian food?**

“It’s never out of fashion – whether it’s embracing fast *and* slow cooking, seasonal ingredients, the Mediterranean diet, understanding that the right carbs aren’t bad for you, riffing off the pantry... But the key is variety. Tuscany is enchanting, Rome is beautiful chaos, Naples is



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crazy but full of life, Puglia is humble and beautiful, Basilicata is unspoilt, Sicily is flamboyant and wild, the Aeolian Islands are idyllic. Italy doesn't just mean one thing."

**What recipe in your new book will surprise us the most?**

"There are a few things I'd never seen before – like an incredible baked rice dish with mussels and white wine – but there are also classic big hitters, like seafood pasta and the best-ever Neapolitan

pizza base. It's a balance of familiar Italian flavours with a few surprising tricks and techniques."

**Is Italy a place to visit year-round?**

"If you go in the autumn or winter, I think people have more time to look after you and love you, and maybe you get a more authentic experience. Plus, some of the very best food comes later in the year: new season olive oil is October/ November and there's a different style of menu then too."

**JAMIE OLIVER**

**UNPACKED**

**CUMIN**  
Jamie swears by a heaped tablespoon of this aromatic spice as his never-fail hangover cure.

**LEATHERMAN**  
Back in 2001, the Naked Chef selected this versatile multitool as his luxury item on *Desert Island Discs*.

**HP SAUCE**  
Jamie reckons this woefully underrated British condiment is key to the perfect bacon sarnie.

**MBE**  
He once quipped his royal recognition would hopefully get him "out of paying parking tickets".

**Got any tips for us to become a little more Italian in our own lives?**

"Don't get weighed down in detail. We don't need everything chopped to the same size – imperfect is perfect. If you're worried about food waste and pollution, think about buying just what you need and shopping locally. Italian nonnas have all the answers – so many of the problems we're facing are solved when people understand how to shop, grow and cook properly."

**And... do you ever feel like you were born in the wrong country?**

"Ha, ha, maybe! I love Italy and the Italian approach to life, but I'll always be an Essex boy at heart." *Jamie Cooks Italy* by Jamie Oliver (Michael Joseph), £26, is out now.