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# The surprising history of carbonara, a classic Roman pasta dish



Carbonara from Pecorino, a restaurant in the Testaccio neighborhood, which inspired many of Rome's contemporary dishes.

By David Farley | Photographs by Ivana Larrosa

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I was about to tuck into a bowl of golden carbonara—spaghetti slathered in gooey egg yolks, dotted with morsels of guanciale, dusted with ground pepper, and topped with pale pecorino sprinkled like freshly fallen snowflakes—when my dining companion asked about the dish's origins.

We were in Testaccio, a historically working-class neighborhood in Rome that's known for its erstwhile slaughterhouse and the many legendary restaurants that sprang up here in the late 19th century, including this one, **Checchino dal 1887**.

"Well," I said, clearing my throat. "There are a handful of theories. Some people believe the dish was invented in the 19th century by the carbonari, guys who lived outside of Rome and spent long hours making coal. But oddly, one of the first times carbonara appeared as a recipe in Italy was in 1954 in the magazine *La Cucina Italiana*."

"Fake news!" someone suddenly interjected. Before I could even see where the booming voice had come from, the speaker repeated his assertion. "This is fake news. Do not listen to this man."

The voice, it turned out, belonged to Simone Mina, whose family has owned Checchino since it first fired up its pasta-boiling burners in 1887. Mina launched into a rambling soliloquy and promoted an oft-repeated theory that, centuries ago, shepherds in the Roman countryside created something resembling the dish. Clearly, carbonara's history is complicated. And controversial.

I could understand. About a decade ago, I lived in the Eternal City for a couple of years and became obsessed with carbonara, a classic Roman pasta dish. I loved how the eggs and cheese conspired to create a creamy texture; how the unctuous and fatty pork cheek added saltiness; and how the ground pepper tickled my palate. The dish, made with spaghetti or rigatoni, inevitably set off the most delicious umami bomb in my mouth.



Chef Manuel Trecastelli of Trecca in Rome grinds pepper into rigatoni alla carbonara.

After moving back to New York, I began making carbonara at home. When I had guests over for dinner, it was my go-to dish. It was always a hit, and I felt like I had some kind of ownership over it, even though I'm not Roman or even Italian. If I went to a restaurant and saw that onion, garlic, or bacon had crept into the dish? Basta! The presence of cream? A culinary war crime!

I imagined myself part of a loose coalition of carbonara police: purists with a militant zeal to preserve the dish with its 5 essential ingredients: eggs, guanciale (cured pork cheek), pecorino Romano, ground pepper, and spaghetti or rigatoni.

Yet no one seemed certain about how the dish originated. What if I could track down carbonara's true provenance? Would I feel differently about it? Would I lose my love for it? Or maybe even appreciate it more?

I decided to take my chances and spend a week in Rome investigating the dish's origins. But even as I was packing my bags for the trip, a radical theory suddenly re-emerged that had everyone in Italy talking. The Financial Times had published an interview with Italian Marxist scholar Alberto Grandi, who is famous (and very unpopular) in Italy for debunking myths about Italian cuisine. The article recounted the theory that carbonara was, in essence, an American dish.

The idea, which is rooted in post-World War II Rome, involved the eating habits of American GIs stationed there. The theory wasn't new to food-history buffs in Italy, but amplifying it in an international publication like the Financial Times inflamed a large portion of the Italian public. By the time I got off the plane at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport, the entire nation, it seemed, was up in arms.

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## **A twist in the case**



Nestled among the Colosseum, the Forum, and Termini Train Station, the Monti neighborhood's narrow lanes are filled with trattorias.

The aggrieved included Francesco Panella, a TV host and co-owner of the century-old Roman restaurant **Antica Pesa**, which also has an outlet in Brooklyn, New York. As I dug into a plate of carbonara at his restaurant in Rome's Trastevere neighborhood shortly after I arrived in Italy, he wandered over to my table and scoffed at the idea that the dish was American.

"I would like to know how many kids in America have a memory of carbonara from their childhood," he said. "In Italian culture, we try to protect our identity. Respect what your mother cooked, what your grandmother cooked."

Panella wasn't sure about the dish's origins, but he added: "If carbonara were American, wouldn't it have things like bacon and cream in it? When foreign chefs deviate from an Italian recipe ... if you add garlic or cream to carbonara, it's because you're not rooted in this kind of ancestral connection that is inherent in Italy."

I liked his reasoning, yet when I started researching some of the earliest carbonara recipes online, I made an odd discovery.

Instead of seeing pecorino Romano listed, I saw Gruyère or Parmigiano. Instead of

guanciale, I saw bacon or pancetta. I even saw—gasp!—cream. In fact, the most respected cookbook authors in Italy included cream in their recipes until the 1990s. Then cream mysteriously disappeared from the dish. Why? Could that be a clue to carbonara’s origins? In search of answers, I tracked down another carbonara pro.



Chef Luciano Monosilio, the self-proclaimed King of Carbonara, at his restaurant in Rome.

“Cream vanished in the ‘90s because chefs were more focused on defining an Italian identity via cuisine,” said Eleonora Cozzella, author of *La Carbonara Perfetta*, a cookbook and history of the dish. We met just around the corner from Campo de’ Fiori square at **Luciano Cucina Italiana**, a restaurant helmed by celebrity chef Luciano Monosilio, who’s

nicknamed the King of Carbonara. Cozzella continued: “Cream is not part of the Italian culinary tradition. It’s French.

In the past, if you wanted to have a fine-dining restaurant, it had to be French or made with French technique, and that always involved cream. But as Italian chefs began to embrace their Italian-ness in the 1990s, the cream disappeared.”

I was all ears.

“People consider traditional what they find an identity in,” Cozzella continued. “And carbonara was a kind of rebirth dish. After World War II, carbonara represented a new spirit, and as time went on, and as carbonara became tied to an identity in Italy, it got mythologized. The ingredients helped solidify this: Guanciale is particular to Rome. And pecorino, a Roman cheese, was used. Not Parmigiano.”

I wanted to press Cozzella on carbonara’s origins, but just then chef Monosilio stopped by our table to say hello and caught wind of our conversation.

“Some cities and regions have football teams that help create their identity,” Monosilio said. “But in Rome, we have food. We want to respect our grandmothers. She made it this way, so we must also make it the same way. It’s like a religion. The rules are not up for debate.” He walked away, and before I could ask Cozzella for her theory, she dropped an egg-loaded bomb into our conversation. “After 1945, people in Rome talked about carbonara, but it didn’t appear as a recipe until 1952. And guess where the recipe first appeared?”

I shrugged. “A Roman food magazine?”

Cozzella shook her head and smiled wryly. “In Chicago.”

What’s considered to be the first published carbonara recipe, she explained, appeared in Patricia Bronté’s *Vittles and Vice*, published in 1952. The book included recipes from restaurants on Chicago’s Near North Side, and the carbonara recipe came from a Chicago restaurant called Armando’s. Its chef, who was the son of an Italian immigrant, had spent years in Italy. Did he learn about carbonara while in the country? Or had he simply heard about the dish from his Italian mother?

Whatever the case, one of the first carbonara recipes published in Italy appeared 2 years later, in **La Cucina Italiana**. That recipe called for Gruyère because, as Cozzella explained, “It was a fancy French cheese and the readership of the magazine was wealthy.” The

recipe also called for pancetta and garlic.

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## Tying up loose ends

Clearly, carbonara's provenance was more complicated than I'd imagined. I could feel my insistence on some sort of carbonara purity starting to wane. Still, I wondered: How and when did so many of us become so inflexible about the ingredients? What was that all about?

I recalled reading once about "the invention of tradition," historian Eric Hobsbawm's theory that after a nation or community endures a traumatic event, an identity crisis often follows. It's not uncommon, he maintained, for a society to create a tradition, something mythical that harks back to the "good old days," thus bridging the gap between a tragedy's aftermath and a seemingly more idyllic time.

Hobsbawm didn't refer to carbonara specifically, but the dish fits into his theory. After suffering the trauma of World War II, Italy emerged dirt poor. People were starving. On the streets of Rome, a black market had emerged for once-ubiquitous products.

When Italy's economy improved in the late 1950s and '60s, Italians looked to the past to regain a sense of identity and shared history. That's when many people, especially in Rome, latched on to the idea that carbonara had been a part of Rome's culinary landscape all along.





Brothers Manuel (left) and Nicolò Trecastelli are chefs and owners of Trecca.

That would help explain why many Italians believed carbonara dated back centuries. But why was the dish's origin still so controversial today? I put the question to chef Nicolò Trecastelli of **Trecca**, a restaurant in Rome's Garbatella neighborhood. "The problem," he said matter-of-factly, "is that we're currently obsessed with 'authenticity.'"

He was right. And I could understand why. We're living through a period of dizzying change. The digital revolution has given us Photoshop and artificial intelligence, and it's getting harder to tell what's real and what isn't. You can understand authenticity's appeal.

It's not a coincidence, I thought, that many people are looking inward and backward. Young people are starting knitting circles. Music lovers are snapping up vinyl records like it's 1972. And many people care—deeply—about where their food comes from. Terms like "farm to table," "locavore," and "slow food" have become essential to the culinary lexicon. Imagining that carbonara came from a simpler era feels good.

As my time in Rome wound down, I found myself buying the theory that American GIs had a role in carbonara's origins, but I wanted one more expert opinion. On my penultimate day in Rome, I went to **Pecorino**, a restaurant located around the corner from Checchino dal 1887. There, I feasted on carbonara with Roman food historian Emilio Ferracci and asked

him about the dish's origins.

"It's a fact," he said, "that U.S. soldiers in Rome were eating something called 'spaghetti breakfast' that mixed bacon and eggs. It's also true that the Americans stationed in Rome had powdered eggs and packets of dried bacon as rations."

Ferracci took a bite and held up a finger to punctuate the point he was about to make: "I believe that a Roman chef discovered rations of powdered egg and dried bacon at a black market and decided to mix them with some pasta and serve this 'spaghetti breakfast,' knowing that Americans eat bacon and eggs for breakfast."

Then came the part that brought it all together. "Over time," he said, "Romans began eating it too, but we localized it. We swapped out the bacon for guanciale, the Parmigiano or Gruyère with pecorino, and began using real eggs. And that's how carbonara was born."



View of Rome's Garbatella neighborhood from the Trecastelli brothers' Trecca restaurant.

“So,” Ferracci concluded, “carbonara is not an American dish, but the idea of the dish—using eggs and bacon—was inspired by American eating habits.” He added, “It’s as simple as that. And we Romans have to come to terms with it.”

To be sure, all Romans haven’t come to terms with it, but his explanation made sense.

After a week spent devouring carbonara and talking to chefs and food historians, I was pretty convinced that Ferracci was right: An Italian chef—whose identity we may never know—likely stumbled upon some rations of powdered eggs and dried bacon and, with a burst of inspiration, combined the ingredients with pasta. Americans inspired it, but

Italians invented it.

A few weeks after returning to New York, I dined at a new restaurant that offered carbonara. It had a poached egg and peas. But now, I didn't bristle at the sight of the ingredients. I didn't scream, "Fake news!" I ordered the dish. And, amazingly, I loved it.

*David Farley is a food and travel writer based in New York City.*

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## Where to eat carbonara in Rome

### **Armando al Pantheon**

The egg yolk–dominated spaghetti alla carbonara sprinkled with white pecorino wows diners at this restaurant that dates to 1961.

### **Hosteria Grappolo d'Oro**

Just off Campo de' Fiori plaza, chef Antonello Magliari dices the guanciale used in his carbonara, which makes the fatty pork bits crispy and even more flavorful.

### **L'Arcangelo**

Near the Vatican, lauded chef Arcangelo Dandini makes his rigatoni alla carbonara with just the egg yolks (not whole eggs), which gives the dish a golden hue and a bold flavor.

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## Where to stay in Rome

### **Cosmopolita Hotel**

Located near the Forum, the Cosmopolita is a short walk from both the Pantheon and Campo de' Fiori. Rates start at about \$208.

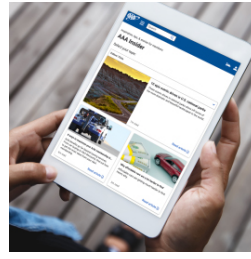
### **Anantara Palazzo Naiadi**

For a splurge; most rooms look out to Piazza della Repubblica. Rates start at about \$550.



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