

THE ITALIAN PANTRY

The foundations of Italian cooking have been set in stone for generations. But not all spaghetti is the same. Not all olive oils are created equal. When it comes to perfect textures and the best possible flavour, ingredients matter. Here are eight staples you should always have to hand.



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POMODORO SAN MARZANO

Take away tomatoes, and you eradicate about 70% of Italy's menu; ragu, Caprese salad, Bolognese, *panzanella*, passata – they're the bedrock of Italian cuisine, so you'd do well to have both fresh and tinned variants to hand. San Marzano tomatoes – grown in Sarno Valley near Mount Vesuvius – have earned coveted protected designation of origin (DOP) status; pick up a few tins of '*Pomodoro S. Marzano dell'Agro Sarnese-Nocerino DOP*' and you'll be in safe hands. With meaty flesh and a comparatively low water content, this variety is ideal for pasta sauces, while, as any Italian pizzeria will tell you, the only Neapolitan worth having is one spread with San Marzano passata.

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DOPPIO ZERO

Italian flour is graded by how finely it is milled. Hard to come by, *doppio zero* or '00' is about as fine as it gets, with an almost powder-like consistency. It's made by milling the inner part of the wheat berry, so no bran residue creeps in to the final product, which is what makes it so different from British plain flour. Low-gluten durum wheat 00 flour produces crispier breads, a finer texture in cakes and superior pasta dough. Nutritionally speaking, it's not got a whole lot going for it as all bran is filtered out, but it will honour you with absurdly silky focaccia and beautifully flaky pastries.

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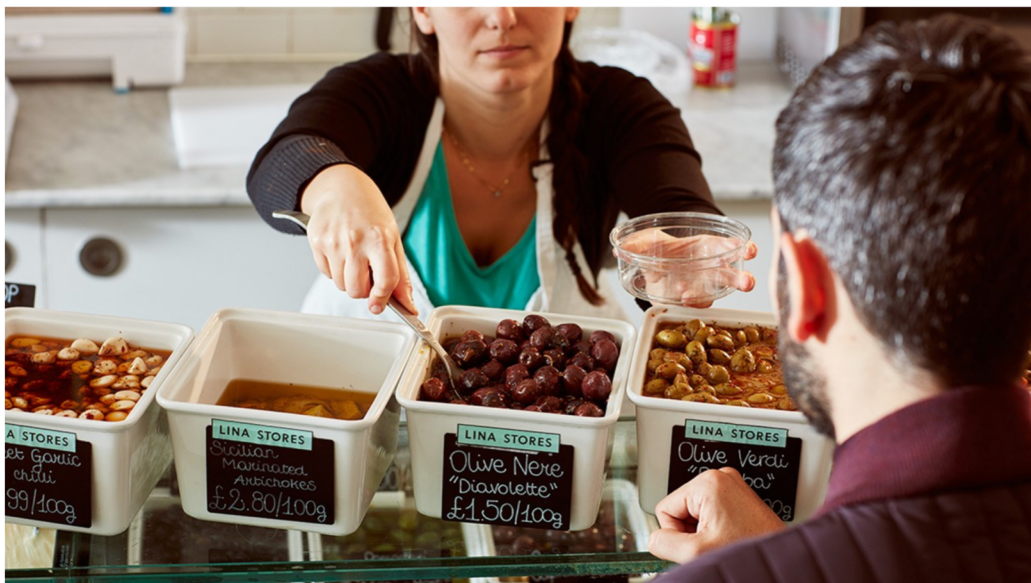
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OLIO D'OLIVA

Any creditable olive oil will specify the region in which it was made, so check the labelling before you select your weapon of choice. While extra virgin olive oil is perfect for drizzling over salads, salumi and cheeses, the flavour diminishes as soon as heat is introduced, so select a pure olive oil for cooking needs and use the good stuff as you would a condiment. This blend from the Colonna estate in Molise has a peppery kick, while Punta Licosta's popular offering hails from the National Park of Cilento in Campania and has a clean, grassy finish.





OLIVES

Much like chillies, different coloured olives can all stem from the same tree. They gradually turn from green, to purple to jet black and the darker the shade, the riper the fruit. *Castelvetrano* green olives from Sicily are meaty and buttery with a mild flavour. They work nicely as part of an aperitivo dish, or eaten by themselves. At the slightly more bitter end of the scale, eponymously named *Gaeta* olives – hailing from a town just south of Rome – are good chopped up on pizza or stirred into spaghetti dishes. Harvested in winter, these little orbs are purple-brown in colour with wrinkled skins, yielding flesh and a citrusy aftertaste.



DRIED PASTA

While homemade pasta is the only way forward for perfect ravioli and delicate tortellini bundles, fresh supermarket efforts aren't always the next best thing. Often over-glutinous, fresh packeted pasta can stray towards the gloopy end of the spectrum, whereas pasta dried under the strictest regulations in Italy, can be transformed into silken al dente strands.

The best Italian pasta is put through bronze dies and dried slowly for up to 76 hours, to achieve a slightly pliable (rather than brittle) structure, and a rough texture. This creates little footholds for every drop of sauce to cling to, preventing all that flavour from sliding off and plummeting to base camp at the bottom of your bowl. Both Rustichella d'Abruzzo and Benedetto Cavalieri from the Apulia region make pasta in this fashion and can be easily found in delis and supermarkets, so a couple of bags for your pantry is pretty much obligatory.



CARNAROLI RISO

Of the 150 types of rice grown in Italy, when it comes to the ultimate risotto there is one grain that trumps all others: carnaroli, cultivated in Lombardy and Piedmont, is heralded by top European chefs for its plump shape and firm texture. It weathers poorly, frequently fractures during production and yields a smaller harvest than its rivals (Arborio, vialone nano and Roma), so the bad news is it's more than twice the price of more common rice. But thanks to its high starch content and slightly longer shape, it withstands slow cooking better than any other grain and provides the perfect consistency for risottos and crisp arancini balls.



GUANCIALE

If you've tried it, you'll know: bacon and pancetta are not the same. They're just not. They're the wimpy little cousins of *guanciale*. Unlike most salumi that's eaten raw, this cut from the jowl of a pig is often used as a cooking ingredient - a versatile addition to your culinary armoury. Rich in fat, it crisps up deliciously in a dry frying pan and can be added to a huge range of soups and casseroles for an incredible depth of flavour. Alternatively, let the champ play a starring role in the best carbonara you've ever had.



TARTUFI

Yes, they're expensive. But a scant shaving of raw Alba white truffle atop a twirling mound of buttery spaghetti sets a pasta dish off like no other accoutrement can. With hunting season in Italy's Piedmont region stretching from late September to November and a single mushroom fetching up to £2,000 per pound, white truffles are hardly a year-round staple. Their darker (less expensive) counterparts however, can be tracked down in all seasons and spring to life cooked with red meat, poultry and *pâtés*.

But it's *preserved* truffles that deserve a permanent place in your pantry. Boiled in brine and sealed in jars, they can be sliced, sautéed and added to hot dishes just before serving, or chopped finely and used in vinaigrettes and tapenades. Make sure the jar is labelled 'first boiling' – any truffles preserved after a second boiling absolutely haemorrhage flavour before they reach your kitchen. Try black summer truffles from Carlo Urbani, or summer whites from Eugenio Brezzi.

This article originally appeared on [House of Peroni](#).

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