

# Jewish Food in Rome

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The episode was published on the 80th anniversary of the forced deportation of the Jews of Rome, almost all of whom died in Auschwitz. That much I had planned. The events of the week before took me by horrified surprise, and my only response was to carry on as planned.

To help me understand the transformation that has changed the former ghetto almost beyond recognition I enlisted the help of Micaela Pavoncello, a guide to Jewish Rome, and Sean Wyer, who has carried out an academic study into the “foodification” of the former ghetto.

We started by asking what makes *carciofi alla giudia*, deep fried artichokes, Jewish, when they can be found in every sort of restaurant across Rome.

**Micaela:** Artichokes that were raising, were growing wild. And when you deep fry even a shoe, it's good. That's what is Jewish about the fried artichoke, that it was nothing, that with a geniality like deep fried artichoke, peeling it in a way that there's no waste, that you get rid of the hard leaves, the ones that you would anyway, when you steam it, you eat only the white part. While we eat much more than the white part, besides the heart of the artichoke. Because when you fry the leaves, it opens up and they become like crispy chips. And that's a way I've never tried the artichokes before. So that's what is also very interesting, approaching an ingredient and eating it in a completely different version, which is much more exciting.

**Sean:** *Carciofi alla giudia* has become this sort of emblem or symbol of Jewish Roman cuisine, precisely because it has this label, and Massimo Montanari has this theory: a dish acquires its name because it leaves the neighbourhood of origin. So *carciofo alla giudia* would never have been called that if it had remained in the former ghetto, because it would have just been, you know, if you live in Jewish Rome,

it's just an artichoke for you. So it acquires this name because it acquired Rome-wide fame.

**Jeremy:** Of course, that doesn't explain why the other most popular artichoke is *carciofo alla romano* all over Rome, and not just in the ghetto. But that's a quibble. Despite the fact that *carciofo alla giudia* is not confined to the ghetto anymore, all food in the ghetto has seen amazing change over the past 20 or 30 years.

**Micaela:** When I was a child, there was one kosher restaurant. I'm 47, so I think I really ... and I started my business as a tour guide of the Jewish history of Rome 22 years ago. So in the last 20 years, I saw a tremendous change.

**Sean:** It has a couple of very old restaurants. I think I've counted four that have been there for over 90 years, and they're very classic Roman restaurants. One of them was historically Jewish owned, but by and large they bill themselves as being classic Roman restaurants.

**Micaela:** From one kosher restaurant, then we got two, then three, then five, then seven, and now there are 20 Kosher restaurants in one main street, that go from oriental Israeli, falafel, Libyan, typical Roman Jewish ...

**Jeremy:** It's this change that Sean Weyer has been studying. He's just published a paper about the foodification of the ghetto, in quotation marks, a term I had never heard before.

**Sean:** It's an interesting term because it started off, as so many food trends, in Brooklyn, New York, and there was an article in 2010 that was written by Kristen Brown which describes the foodification of Brooklyn, which she actually describes it as food-led gentrification. In academia, it seems to be particularly Italian scholars that have grabbed hold of this idea of foodification, because there are so many Italian cities where it seems to describe a neighbourhood perfectly. You know, the former ghetto in Rome used to have a number of non-food-related commercial businesses, particularly things textile businesses, but also it was a classic neighbourhood high street in the sense that seemingly now it's become a restaurant-led commercial space, really.

**Jeremy:** So what's the difference between foodification and just gentrification?

**Sean:** Interesting question, because I think early on, when foodification was coined, they were they were seen as synonymous. But gentrification, if we're to be sort of specific and take the sociological definition of gentrification, really describes the displacement of people, the displacement of residents. So it's the neighbourhood becoming too expensive for the people who historically have lived there, and they're forced out basically. And of course, foodification and gentrification can come together. And foodification creates what some scholars would call a displacement atmosphere. So it makes a neighbourhood attractive for gentrification. You know, if you are a rich Roman or a rich non-Roman looking to invest in Rome and buy property there, this neighbourhood, which once was a working class neighbourhood, relatively poor despite being very central, once it starts to have all these lovely restaurants and of course, it's pedestrianised now, the via del Portico Ottavia, it becomes a much more attractive place for people who might, decades ago, have sort of looked at it and thought, well, that's not really for me.

**Jeremy:** Looking back, it's important to note that Jews have been in Rome since well before the start of the Christian era.

**Micaela:** The Jewish community of Rome is a unique community because we came straight from Jerusalem before even Christ was born, to ask protection to the Romans against that Syrian king who had conquered Judea and wanted to impose his pagan culture and his own cult. So we decided to send ambassadors to Rome to ask protection to the Romans against the Greeks. And then we never left, because, you know, Rome could offer us great chances to start a new life with the harbour of Ostia. We could speak Greek. We could establish connections with other Jewish communities of the Mediterranean. So we found a great place. And so we were actually even protected, and it's not so common in the history of the Jews. And we were protected by the great Julius Caesar, who made specific rules to make sure that we could celebrate our holidays, keep our rules, gather in synagogue, build synagogues, and not all these things have always been granted. And so that made possible the growing of a community. Jews at that time in Rome got to the huge number of 10,000 when Rome was a city of 1 million citizens.

**Jeremy:** Today, there are 13,000 Jews in a city of 3 to 4 million. But if things were okay during the Roman Republic and Empire, they started

to go downhill after Constantine made Christianity the empire's official religion in the fifth century. And they got really bad under Pope Paul the Fourth. In 1555, although there had been a Jewish quarter before, he confined them to a walled ghetto with a single gate that was closed at sundown. He forced them to wear a distinctive yellow hat, and he destroyed seven of the eight Jewish synagogues. The ghetto was packed tight with Jews, and it was right on the banks of the Tiber, so it flooded every winter. By the end of his four year reign, the number of Jews in Rome had halved.

**Micaela:** The aim of the Pope, Paul the Fourth, when he established the ghetto, was not killing them. He used the theological kind of exception. He couldn't kill the Jews. He had to keep them alive as an example, not to be followed. And so by giving them a hard time with the ghetto and giving them rules to obey, he was hoping that we would choose to give up and convert into Christians, and therefore get our souls saved. Because, you know, if you're not baptised, you go to hell.

**Jeremy:** A dozen popes later, it was the turn of Urban the Eighth. Now he was responsible for much of the work that made Rome as beautiful as it is. But he also picked up from where Paul the Fourth left off.

**Micaela:** From an anti-Semitic point of view, he was one of the worst. Imagine that during his papacy, even though Jews were living and working in a fish market, the former portico di Ottavia, a beautiful imperial building from the time of Augustus. Well, if you deal with fish, you might get the best fishes for you, for your family, right? No! Jews were not allowed, even though they were in the fish business, to have for themselves big fishes.

**Sean:** Not suddenly, but over a period of decades, something that was historically a sort of marker of poverty, this *l'arte d'arrangiarsi*, the art of getting by. ... You take these various cheap ingredients and you find some way of putting them together and cooking them so that they make something tasty and nutritious.

**Micaela:** So we ended up having only anchovies and sardines. Now, besides, I don't think the Pope knew about the omega three that is preserved in the anchovies. because if he knew, we would not be able to eat those either. And that's anchovies and sardines. Mediterranean fish. You know, the poor fish. It's part of our culture. It's part of our ...

We have a famous anchovies and endive pie. It's not really a pie. It's just a layer of endive, which is a very bitter salad that nobody likes, in layers with fresh anchovies without spine or head, good amount of olive oil, salt and pepper. Several layers of these foods. Bake it in the oven and everything tastes great. The bitter endive that becomes so crunchy and black and burnt.

**Jeremy:** You mentioned the endive — escarole — and there's the escarole with pine nuts and raisins as well.

**Micaela:** Yes, yes, because the escarole is very bitter again. But if you put raisins and pine nuts, and you sauté ... I think that this sauté, it's typical of people who have nothing to eat. For example, chicory. Chicory. You can't find it anywhere else than Rome, chicory. It was, again, a wild grass that generally it's good for cows and horses. I remember I used to have a Romanian maid. And when I used to go to the market, bringing huge plastic bags full of chicory, she would watch around and say, where are the horses? And I would say, no, this is for us. We steam it and then we put it in a pan with garlic, good amount of olive oil, chilli and then everything tastes good.

**Jeremy:** And that would be *cicoria ripassata*, which, like artichokes, is found everywhere in Rome. Most people probably don't think of it as Jewish. So are there other foods typical of Roman cooking that people maybe don't realise are Jewish?

**Micaela:** First of all, whatever has raisins and pine nuts, it comes from the Sephardi Jews, from the Jews who escaped from Portugal and Spain after the 1492 expulsion. Some of them came straight to Rome, some stopped by in the south of Italy that still belonged to Spain, to be kicked out a few years later. And so a lot of these ingredients, sweet and sour, with pine nuts, raisins, they are definitely of Jewish origins. And they were taken to Rome as well. Again, the frying, the concept of frying, is typically Jewish because in Rome Christians were using the fat, *strutto* [of pork]. And for us this would be, first of all, completely impossible for us, you know, kashrut rules. But also we cannot mix milk and meat. So not even butter would be a solution for us. So that's why olive oil, because we would also cook apples fried.

So I'm imagining these ladies going to Campo di Fiori at the end of the day. You know, the Jewish ladies going out from the ghetto, it was allowed from morning to sunset. So I imagine them going at the end

of the day when everything is cheap or there are leftovers, chopping all these things and just deep frying them, whatever was fryable. And then another thing that is typically Jewish is definitely the interiors: the offal, brain, tongue, cheeks. But this is all over the Jewish world, because probably they were considered the the least noble parts of the beef, *il quinto quarto*. And we had a monopoly of the *quinto quarto*. So if you come to the Jewish Quarter today, it's not uncommon to see people that eat brain fried with artichokes. I grew up with that.

**Jeremy:** And that too can be found, not quite as easily as those *carciofi alla giudia*, in lots of Roman restaurants. In fact, most of the foods and techniques that Micaela mentioned are familiar right across Rome. Which for me raises another question: who eats in the ghetto?

**Sean:** The clientele is a real, real mixture. That's one of the things that makes it a very interesting place to study, because you do certainly have tourists, tourists to Rome in general, will go there. The Lonely Planet, for example, directs first-time tourists to go and eat in the ghetto, to eat the Jewish Roman specialties in the ghetto.

**Micaela:** Listen. I cannot stand when I see ... I'm coming to Rome. I was told that I have to go to see the Jewish Quarter, the Jewish Museum? No, just go there to eat. And this experience cannot proceed from the historical context. You will not appreciate in the same way, if you go just to eat in the Jewish quarter, because you're not going to understand what is what you're eating, because that is in centuries of history, of finding solutions to limitations.

**Sean:** Of course, Jewish tourists, observant Jewish tourists, are on the lookout for kosher food. Not an especially simple thing to find. And then, of course, there are locals. So there's a perception in Rome, I think, which is quite strong, that the former ghetto, because it was historically an enclosed neighbourhood, because it has a strong sense of local character, is a kind of ... it's perceived as a sort of time capsule of Rome as it once was. So you hear people saying, well, you know, if you want to eat the real traditional Roman cuisine before it was affected by X, Y, and Z, what you have to do is go to the ghetto and eat there. So you have met plenty of Romans who go precisely on the lookout for traditional Roman cuisine that look to this area.

**Jeremy:** And is there any sense in which ordinary Romans, other Italians, maybe visiting Rome, are going to the ghetto in a sense to eat

ethnic food? Like I might go in London, to Southall to to eat Indian food?

**Sean:** It's complicated because the old Jewish Roman tradition is seen as absolutely Romanesque. So people are going for that kind of cuisine. Things like *aliciotti con l'invidia*, of course the famous *carciofo alla giudia*, these kind of old dishes are seen not as exotic or quote unquote, ethnic food, but rather they're seen as hyper-local Roman dishes. That's then complicated, though, by the fact that the restaurants in the former ghetto have a real mixture. Many of these restaurants have almost two halves of the menu. Sometimes they're literally separated out into something like *Cucina della tradizione romana*, cuisine of the Roman tradition, and then you have sort of what one might call a modern Jewish cuisine side of the menu, which is very similar to what one might get in an Ottolenghi restaurant in London, or indeed somewhere like the Marais in Paris, which is predominantly, though not entirely, sort of Mizrahi, as in Middle Eastern Jewish cuisine. Things like falafel, which really aren't part of the historic Roman Jewish tradition at all. And those dishes, I think, do have a slight ... do have a certain appeal. For Italians, there's something slightly different, you know. It's equivalent, perhaps, or similar to going out for sushi.

**Jeremy:** Of course, a lot of the old traditional Roman dishes were never available to the Jews because of the restrictions surrounding kosher foods. And one of the other things that's changed in the ghetto is that versions of those dishes are now on offer.

**Sean:** One of the really interesting case studies that I picked up on was the carbonara, because of course, you go to Rome looking for what has become sort of the symbolic Roman dish, the carbonara particularly, the Roman dish that has acquired fame outside the city. But of course, this is really off bounds for so many reasons for an observant Jew. It has pork in it, but also it mixes cheese and meat. So you have various versions.

**Jeremy:** If you're the kind of person who turns incandescent with rage when you hear about quote, inauthentic, unquote adaptations of things like carbonara, better skip ahead now.

**Sean:** So you have various versions. One of them involves using dried meat, other than pork. So dried beef for example, which can be kind of smoked to recreate that kind of guanciale-like flavour of ... it's in

the right ballpark. And of course, if you cook it without cheese, that can be made kosher quite simply. There is also the use, which I find very interesting of the crispy leaves of the *carciofi alla giudia*, which of course have been salted, and they sort of recreate that texture, particularly of well cooked *guanciale* when it's crunchy. So you can use that even to make a sort of vegetarian approximate.

People get very, um ... People get quite protective when you call something that isn't rigorously a carbonara, a carbonara. But this is also a way of opening this dish up to new audiences. So I think it's a dynamic and interesting thing to observe.

**Jeremy:** And how about pizza?

**Sean:** Pizza is another really intriguing question in the former ghetto, because theoretically it should be a relatively easy thing to make kosher. There are plenty of ways of making kosher cheese, but up until the 80s and 90s, one of the very few kosher businesses in the former ghetto, was a pizzeria. But it was a pizzeria, which was ...

So, Jewish restaurants, kosher restaurants, often choose to be completely dairy based or completely meat based in order to kind of completely avoid any overlap between the two. So this was a pizzeria that was kosher, but it was it was meat based. So there was no cheese on the pizza, which of course ... I mean, many of my interviewees in the former ghetto said, well, this is just completely absurd because ... And I think part of the reasoning behind that was because there were kosher butchers in — and there have been for centuries — in Rome, but kosher cheese, rigorously certified kosher cheese production is a very new thing in contemporary Italy. It took Jewish Roman entrepreneurs spotting this gap and actually calling up cheese producers and saying, you know, on one day a week, can we come and use some of your production to make kosher cheese? And very, very gradually this has developed into an industry. And now there is a kosher pizzeria in the former ghetto that does do cheese-topped pizzas. And of course, there are plenty of restaurants that do too.

**Jeremy:** I said I'd not heard of the term foodification. And there are a couple of other terms in your in your paper that I hadn't come across. One was gastronomical, gastronomic, gastronomicisation and gourmetisation. And I'm just wondering, what's that all about? Or is this just sort of pseudo academic speak?



**Sean:** Um, I don't think so. No, I think I mean, Gourmetisation is essentially the process of something that was historically not considered gourmet, as in not considered high cuisine, something, you know, something that might have used historically, not particularly well-regarded ingredients. And there are plenty of Roman examples of this. I mean, lots of the Roman dishes use the *quinto quarto*, as we know, these sort of historically very cheap cuts of meat, and yet now they've become sought after. Right? It's no longer the case that people look down on, you know, certainly foodies ... It's no longer the case that foodies look down on things like tripe. And in fact, people are now hunting up and down the city looking for the best *trippa alla romana*, the best *pajata*, things that in the mid-20th century would have been seen as reminders of Rome's historic poverty. So I think, I think gourmetisation is quite a useful term to describe that process. It's quite neat. But yeah, it is ... Of course it has .... Anything with an -ation in it does have a sort of academic twang to it.

**Jeremy:** And if you think about it, gourmetisation is exactly what's happened to the traditional Jewish food of Rome and many other cuisines. Sean WYer mentioned the fact that there are now different kinds of Jewish food available. Thanks, for example, to the influx of Libyan Jews in 1967. In fact, Micaela's own mother is from Libya. But when I asked her if Jewish food was changing, she was adamant.

**Micaela:** No, it's not changing. It's just adding more gastronomic experiences. But you will never change the *stracotto*, the *stracotto*, which is our *cholent*, will never be cooked with cumin because of the Libyans. No, the *stracotto* stays the *stracotto*, and the Libyans keep doing all those dishes with their spices, and nothing is changed because for the Jews, food, it's the smell, the aroma of some dishes. It's just a memory that connects generations of generations of people. So you don't want to change those recipes. You have some ... I have, for some recipes, like a reverential respect.

**Jeremy:** That's not exclusive to Roman Jewish cuisine, of course. And they're both right. Traditional Roman Jewish cuisine is staying more or less as it was. But Jewish food is expanding to take in other kinds of traditions in their different ways. Micaela Pavoncello and Sean WYer have both seen the foodification of the Roman ghetto first hand. Sean's more academic study amplifies Michaela's lived experience.

So after more than 2000 years of unbroken history in Rome, with all the changes that have taken place over that time, what of the future for foodification?

**Sean:** In terms of real estate almost, it can't go a great deal further. There are a few non-food businesses still in the ghetto. It's a relatively small neighbourhood, so I don't know whether you could fit more restaurants in there. The interesting thing to watch will be what kind of food is on sale there. So already you have this jostling between, I mean, old Roman cuisine per se. You've got these these old historic Roman restaurants there, Jewish Roman cuisine. I think that there's a possibility that Jewish Roman cuisine may become even more of a trend in the former ghetto, because I think people are on the lookout. Romans and, sort of, tourists in the know, for want of a better phrase, are on the lookout for dishes that are sort of maybe less popular parts of the Roman canon.

So this is sort of what Massimo Montanari calls the paradox of globalisation, where actually you have this restaurant environment where you can go and eat anything: sushi, burgers, kebabs, all the rest. People actually, as a sort of reaction to that also, then look deeper in their own cultural tradition to sort of dig out the recipe books and preserve the things that they feel to be at risk by globalisation. So I wonder whether there may be a sort of further diversification of food in the former ghetto. So these the Middle Eastern restaurants will, of course, stay there and they'll be very popular. But I think also restaurants are starting to put older and more traditional Jewish Roman dishes on their menus, too.

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