

QUILTING WITH ANTIPASTO

Antipasto means 'before the main course', but I believe that antipasto can also be the main event. Antipasto can be served hot or cold but the majority of antipasto is usually served cold and can be prepared ahead of time. In Italy antipasto is often served in a mosaic of bowls or plates, spread over a table (buffet style) or a row or two down the center of the dinner table. Enjoying antipasto is an occasion to sit, relax, visit and nibble.

Building an antipasto tray is like my memory of my mother quilting. Mother gathered whatever fabric was available and sewed what she called crazy-patch. The odd pieces of fabric were fashioned into squares that were then sewn to create the large quilt. An antipasto tray is much the same. You gather what is available and build a tray that is sized to meet your needs. You can make keep each item as simple or as complex as you choose. Making a tray to feed 6 or 30 is variations on the same technique. Remember to keep your selections bite sized and think about textures and colors.

GATHERING THE FABRIC

Meat

Dry meats and salami are extremely versatile on the antipasto tray. Because of their texture, they can be rolled or quartered and tooth picked. They are lower in moisture, will not become soggy and can be prepared ahead of time.

- Sopressata is an Italian dry-cured salami. The name is said to come from the fact that it is often pressed with a weight while drying, giving it a characteristic flattened shape. It can be made of either fresh hams or pork butts. The meat is typically ground more coarsely than for other types of salami, which gives it an uneven, "rustic" appearance when sliced. Sopressata is a specialty of southern Italy and often includes hot pepper and a healthy dose of garlic (though, as with all salami, seasonings vary). The sausage is hung up to dry for 3 to 8 weeks, depending on the diameter, and loses about 30 percent of its original weight. At the end of the drying phase, the Sopressata is then cut to length and commonly stored in jars of olive oil. When eaten, it is commonly sliced thin and placed on crackers
- Dry Spanish Chorizo is a dry Spanish sausage made with coarsely chopped pork meat that is seasoned with pimentón de la vera (smoked ground paprika). It is served sliced for tapas or as a flavoring ingredient in many Spanish (as well as Portuguese) dishes.
- Pepperoni is available in small "slim jim" size sticks. Pile them like pick-up sticks. The color comes from paprika and cayenne pepper. The flavor is enhanced by fennel and other Italian spices. Pepperoni also comes in a larger slicing size which can be shingled or rolled for the tray.
- Parma Ham is an air-dried ham that is made in the region around Parma, Italy. The Consortium de Parma strictly controls its production from animal to the finished product. Parma Ham is a DOP product, which means that the name, recipe, and area of production are controlled by international agreements. There are many things that differentiate this ham from others. It is 100% natural and is not cooked/heated in any way. The hams are trimmed, salted and hung in sheds (they look like a tobacco sheds) where the sides are slatted and the air from the sea can move around the hams. The hams are sorted by size and curing/drying time is 10 to 12 months depending on the size. There is no smoke used in the drying nor are there any other spices or flavorings in the curing process. Parma Ham is usually used thinly sliced and has a very smooth texture. Flavor is very subtle. Parma ham has a slight perfume and very little saltiness. It is best known in this country as a wrap for melons or fresh figs. Parma Ham is also good served (rolled or in 'kisses") with an antipasto tray or on crusty bread.
- Prosciutto is a general term for Italian-style dried ham. There is a wide range of flavors that are associated with prosciutto. Some are slightly smoked. Some are flavored with fennel others include cinnamon. Many are dried using some heat to speed the process. The biggest difference with a Parma Ham is texture. Because of the heat, the meat has a granular/cooked texture in contrast to the very smooth feel of the Parma. Prosciutto costs about 40% less than Parma. Weaver's Prosciutto has a slight bit of cinnamon in its cure and is not smoked. Prosciutto works very well in recipes that are cooked. It is excellent wrapped around fish, brushed with olive oil and grilled. Diced, it can be sautéed with mixed, diced vegetables and served with a cream sauce over pasta.

- Westphalian Ham takes its name from an area in Germany and denotes a style of manufacture as well as a specific flavor profile. Westphalian ham is cured with salt as well as sugar. After a period of drying, is cold smoked. Generally, Germans use sugar in curing ham while the French and Italians use only salt. Its texture resembles Parma Ham but its flavor is much more intense, smoky, and a bit salty. Traditional Westphalian Ham is made in a four to five inch round format. S. Clyde Weaver Company sells a variation that is made from the sirloin rather than the whole ham. It has a smaller slice (about three inches in diameter) and a natural shape. It is excellent served on buttered European whole grain bread. For an appetizer individual slices can be wrapped around a spear of blanched fresh asparagus.
- Spanish Serrano Ham is silky, intensely flavorful ham made from mountain-raised, acorn-fed Iberian hogs that are grazed in the cork oak forests prevalent in the Spanish countryside. It has a drier, firmer texture and a very pronounced nutty flavor. The best Serrano hams have an almost buttery perfume. Serrano Ham is a rather general term for a Spanish dry ham. In Spanish grocery stores, it is not uncommon to see ten to twelve different varieties offered. The best quality has a price that makes caviar look inexpensive. The differences will be: the area in which the ham is produced, the grade of the meat, the end quality of the ham (aroma is important), and in some cases, a very specific breed of pigs called the "black footed pigs".
- Boquerones are fresh anchovies that are cured in vinegar and oil. These cured fish do not have that harsh flavor of a salt cured anchovies. Due to the vinegar in the cure, the small fuzzy bones are not discernible. These miniature fillets are excellent eaten 'as is' or wrapped around a caperberry or olive.

Cheese (adding contrast)

- Ricotta Salata is one of Italy's most unusual and least understood sheep's milk cheeses. The milk curds and whey used to make this cheese are pressed and dried even before the cheese is aged, giving this pure white cheese a dense but slightly spongy texture and salty, milky flavor - like a dry Italian feta but with less saltiness and intensity. The whiteness of this cheese adds a great visual contrast to any antipasto tray. This is a great addition for its white color.
- Fresh Mozzarella is usually made with cow's milk in this country. Originally it was hand-made but this process made a cheese that was extremely perishable. Because of this, the Italians developed machinery to make mozzarella in a sterile environment. This process has extended the life of the cheese to 7 or 10 days. After the time necessary to distribute the cheese, the consumer can count on 2 to 3 days after purchase providing it is stored in its whey. This cheese should be eaten in its freshest state. Texture is soft and smooth. Flavor is very mild and reminds one of fresh cream. Mozzarella is made into balls of various sizes of which the 4-ounce Ovaline (egg size) and the 1/3-ounce Ciliegine (cherry size) are the most common. Fresh mozzarellas are excellent in a tomato/fresh basil salad with olive oil and balsamic vinegar. The Ciliegine can be marinated with olive oil, pepper flakes and herbs and used as part of antipasti. Ciliegine can also be put on small skewers with dried tomato and fresh basil.
- Technically, Provolone is a slight variation of Mozzarella where the cheese contains more salt and is hung at proper temperature and humidity until it dries and sharpens in flavor. Provolone originated in southern Italy but today is made in all areas of Italy and the world. Flavor is relatively mild for American varieties to very acid, sharp and robust for imported Italian varieties. A good sharp provolone will be aged for 9 months or longer. It is not a bashful cheese and can overwhelm fruit and most wines.
- Asiago is a cheese that originated in the plateau of the same name in the foothills of the Italian Dolomites. It is a cow's milk cheese that is currently made in the area around Vicenza, Italy. This cheese has an amber paste with a very smooth rind that is usually wax coated. Black wax indicates the cheese is aged, while white wax signifies a much younger cheese. A black wax Asiago has a very nutty aroma and a full flavor. It is not as acidic as most other hard aged Italian cheeses. Some of the U.S. brands of black wax Asiago are as good as or better than the imported varieties.
- Italian Parmigiano-Reggiano is the real Italian Parmesan. There are look-alikes but none of the imposters has the aroma, flavor, and depth of a well aged Reggiano. This cheese is hand-made within a prescribed area in Northern Italy. Flavor will vary slightly based on the time of year in

which the cheese was produced, but in all cases it has a subtle sweet, nutty, sharpness. Served as chunks or curls with antipasto tray, its intensity will play nicely with dry salami and olives.

Olives (adding color)

Olives provide versatility. Olives with seeds have the best flavor. Seedless olives tend to be commercially produced and often do not show the uniqueness of the type. Olives lend themselves to mixing with spices, herbs, vegetables and other flavorings.

- Arbequina: Many of the finest Spanish olive oils come from these small olives from the Priorat region. For eating, they are pickled and naturally cured for four months.
- Kalamata: Rich and fruity Kalamata Olives are cured with salt as well as vinegar. These black/purple olives are grown in the valley of Messina on the western end of the Peloponnesian Peninsula near the town of Kalamata. Kalamatas are very attractive olives with their distinctive almond shape and a beautiful deep purple-black color. After picking, Kalamatas are cracked, and then cured in red wine vinegar brine. This process gives them a unique fruity, almost wine-like flavor and a very distinctive crunchy texture.
- Alphonso: Wonderfully rich in texture, these olives are selected and covered with a brine solution that also contains lactic bacteria. The result is a particularly fresh flavor, slightly acid, and salty. Their dark-purple color, size and soft texture makes a great contrast on the tray.
- Picholine: Green, firm, and mild-flavored, these French olives stand up nicely to cured meats. They are excellent marinated with olive oil, bay leaves and lemon.
- Cerignola: Milder than most, these large green or black Mediterranean olives work well in an antipasto platter or as a selection on an olive plate. Cerignola olives are known for their very meaty, firm texture. Usually these olives are a very bright green, although they are available in black and even red.
- Black Oil Cured: This variety is sometimes referred to as a desert olive. Oil cured olives are probably the most misunderstood because their flavor range is unexpected. They are shriveled and tend to be bitter. Used as a supplement with other olives in a mix, they provide added depth of flavor. When marinated, they also "plump up" and soften in flavor as well as texture.
- Nafplion: Although they are little known outside of Greece, Nafplion olives are some of the most delicious green olives you'll ever try. The Nafplion is a small, light green olive, which grows only in the valley of Argos in the Eastern Peloponnese. These olives are hand-picked, then cracked with stones and naturally cured in brine. They have a consistent, firm, crunchy texture, and a superb, nutty, slightly smoky flavor. Nafplion olives are particularly good dressed with extra virgin olive oil, slices of preserved lemon (or fresh lemon) and sprigs of fresh dill.

Vegetables (adding color and texture)

Plain pickled vegetables are one option for your tray, but my experience is that grilled vegetables are much more interesting. To do the vegetables, lightly coat them with olive oil using a pastry brush and season with salt and pepper. Roasting is good, but cooking under the broiler is faster. Drizzle the vegetables with balsamic vinegar and olive oil when they are done. You can also buy roasted vegetables at any market with a good prepared foods counter. Fresh vegetables can work if you provide a good herb infused oil for dipping.

Roasted Red Peppers
Broad Beans in Vinaigrette
Roasted Baby Red Beets with Onions
Grilled Mushrooms
Belgian Endive with Chevre and Walnuts
Stuffed Grape Leaves with Yogurt and Preserved Lemon
Greek Peppers Stuffed with Feta

Cipollini Onions (chip-oh-LEE-nee) is a small, flat, pale onion. The flesh is a slight yellowish color and the skins are thin and papery. The color of the skin ranges from pale yellow to the light brown color of Spanish onions. These are sweeter onions, having more residual sugar than garden-variety white or yellow onions, but not as much as shallots. Sweet and lovely, especially when marinated in balsamic vinegar, they are traditionally served in Italy on an antipasto platter. The advantage to cipollinis is that

they are small and flat and their shape lends them well to roasting, grilling or caramelizing in an iron skillet.

Preserved lemons are an ingredient basic to Moroccan and North African cooking. They are made by quartering whole lemons, stuffing them with salt and sometimes a bit of cardamom, and curing/aging them at room temperature for 2 to 3 weeks. They give a recipe a briny/sourness that is unique. Some people have described the flavor as having the saltiness of an olive combined with the perfume of lemon. Diced preserved lemons can be added to a variety of stews and can also be mashed and blended with Crème Fraiche to make a sauce for fish. If making a whole chicken, baked or rotisserie, stuff the chicken with 1 whole preserved lemon (4 quarters) along with 4 to 5 stems of fresh thyme. Salt and pepper outside and roast. These lemons are available at specialty food stores.

Peppadews are a South African pepper that has a bright red color and a sweet spicy flavor. They are excellent stuffed with a fresh goat cheese (chevre) or ricotta. A bit of chive or parsley adds nice color to the presentation.

Bread, Bruschetta and Crostini

The easiest and most often served antipasti are bruschetta (broo-SKEH-tah) and crostini. Both are slices of bread, toasted and topped with tasty ingredients. However, crostini can be made of either white bread or Italian bread, while bruschetta is always country bread. Crostini are toasted and bruschetta is grilled. Toppings for both are usually added after toasting, the exception being when cheese is used as a topping for crostini. Bruschetta are usually toasted and then rubbed with a clove of garlic, dribbled with olive oil and sprinkled with salt. A most delightful way to start a meal, or have as a snack is bruschetta topped with chopped fresh ripe tomatoes and basil.

See: <http://www.e-rcps.com/pasta/rcp/antipasti/intro.shtml>

Asiago Bread Sticks, Pita Bread, Crusty Country bread, Crostini

To set up the platter use romaine to line the platter. Radicchio leaves make great bowls.

- Dates stuffed with Gorgonzola or St. Agur
- Cherry Mozzarella on skewers with roasted tomatoes and basil
- Herb Salami - rolled
- Sopressata folded in quarters
- Stuffed vine leaves with yogurt and preserved lemons
- Belgian endive with chevre and roasted walnuts
- Nafplion Olives with thyme and preserved lemons
- Alphonso Olives
- Ricotta Salata in wedges
- Parmesano-Reggiano or Asiago
- Grilled Red beets with cipollini onions
- Grilled mushrooms
- Separate plate of boquerones

SHOPPING LIST FOR TWELVE PEOPLE

Meats	Cheeses	Vegetables	Others
¼ lb. Sopressata, thinly sliced	6 oz. Ricotta Salata in wedges	1 pint, Cherry Tomatoes	1 lb. Medjool Dates
¼ lb. Herbed Salami, thinly sliced	½ lb. Mozzarella Balls	3 Heads Belgian Endive	6 oz. Alphonso Olives
¼ lb. Boquerones	¼ lb. Parmesan, curled or chunks	1 Small Can Baby Beets	6 oz. Nafplion Olives
	6 oz. Fresh Cherve	1 pint Cipollini Onions	1 lb. Stuffed Vine Leaves
	8 oz. Gongonzola or St. Agur	1 lb. Mushrooms	¼ lb. Walnuts, Chopped
		2 preserved lemons	4 -6 oz. Greek Yogurt
			Fresh Thyme
			Fresh Basil
			Skewers



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