

Ten things Italians do that make foreigners feel awkward

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Do Italy's public displays of affection embarrass you? Photo: Andreas Solaro/AFP
Moving to a new country makes for a lot of new experiences and embarrassing moments, from language mix-ups to dating faux pas to rules about which pasta shape goes with which sauce. Here are ten Italian habits that can create awkwardness for the uninitiated foreigner.

1) Hanging up on you

The first time you experience '*lo squillo*' - an Italian habit of calling someone, letting the phone ring two or three times and then hanging up - you'd be forgiven for feeling slightly unloved or assuming you're the victim of some practical joke. Actually, this is a common practice among young Italians and is a way of letting you know they've arrived at your meeting point.

In Italy, fixed-minute or pay-as-you-go contracts are much more common than in many other countries, so the '*squillo*' is a handy way of avoiding cutting into your month's allowance, and once you realize what's going on, you'll likely embrace the concept. Plus, it's a fun word to say.

2) Pushing into a queue

If you're from a culture where the queue is sacred (we're looking at you, Brits and Scandinavians), adjusting to the Italian system - or lack of one - can be alarming. At bus stops, bars and bakeries, you're more likely to come across a chaotic cluster than a nice, ordered queue. Try not to let your stress get the better of you, embrace the Italian attitude - and maybe push back if you have to.

3) Criticizing your eating habits

Ah, Italy. The national passion for food and drink is one of the big draws of the country, and it can;t be denied that they've got a lot to be proud of. But the rules surrounding food and drink are so strict and so numerous that it can be overwhelming for a newbie.

[Bizarre Italian food rules foreigners fall foul of](#)

No Parmesan cheese on your main course

Don't even think about it putting Parmesan on your main course. Photo: Emily/Flickr

When in Italy, the overwhelming urge to gorge yourself on Parmesan can be difficult to resist. But be careful.

I recently sparked bedlam at a food stand in Rome after spooning grated cheese from a Parmesan dish over a hearty plate of beef stew. A public shaming ensued.

“*Ma che cafone!*” yelled a stranger pointing at me. Translation: “What an oaf!”

What followed was a five minute exposition of why Parmesan does not go on your secondo – main course - from the stand's owner and various customers.

Apparently the hard cheese's famous flavour can easily overwhelm certain dishes and its use should be limited to pasta and risotto – but even then, there are other rules...

No Parmesan with seafood risotto or pasta

In much the same way you should never put Parmesan on your main course, you must also never add it to risotto or pasta dishes that are made with seafood.

The general thinking is – much the same as the main course rule above – that the strong cheese flavour will overwhelm the delicate taste of the fish.

Interestingly, most pizzerias still offer cheesy seafood pizzas, which can be eaten without fear of rebuke.

No cappuccino or caffè latte after midday

Nothing makes you look more like a tourist than ordering a long, milky coffee past a certain hour, generally regarded to be midday.

Why is midday the arbitrary cut off point?

Well, a cappuccino or caffè latte are generally viewed as breakfast drinks and are considered too voluminous, which can't be enjoyed immediately before or after lunch.

After midday, order yourself an espresso – or if you insist on adding milk, make it a caffè macchiato: that's an espresso topped off with a tiny head of frothed milk.

No hot drinks with food

While we're on the subject, tea and coffee are never drunk with a meal.

While in the UK, you might go into a 'greasy spoon' café and get a mug of tea with your fried breakfast, and in America a coffee with your apple pie at the diner is par for the course – but in Italy it's not the done thing. At all. Order them at the end!

Tea drinkers be warned: whenever you order a tea in Italy, it's going to be served with lemon and not milk. Italians generally find the British fixation with milky tea bizarre.

And when you think about it, adding the secretions of a lactating bovine to leaves boiled in water *is* a little odd.

No walking and eating

Although in some countries the practice of walking and eating is commonplace, in Italy it's a little bit taboo and almost always wrong. Indeed, the country's famous slow food culture revolves around sociable sit-down dinners.

Even legendary street foods, such as Sicilian panelle (chickpea fritters) or Roman suppli (deep-fried rice balls) are not eaten on the go – although they can be eaten standing up if a convenient sitting spot can't be found.

There is one notable exception: gelato. One of the most enjoyable (and socially acceptable) ways to eat Italy's famous ice-cream is during your evening stroll or *passeggiata*.

No salad as a starter

In what is a fairly steadfast rule, leafy salads are eaten last in Italy – not as a side dish or starter.

Salads are almost exclusively dressed with olive oil and vinegar and their position in last place is because they are thought to cleanse the palate and aid digestion.

One of the few exceptions is a crispy Roman salad of *puntarelle*, dressed in anchovies and olive oil, which is usually served as a starter.

No colourful foods when ill

Every culture has its own ideas about what to eat when ill.

Some swear by energy drinks, others by chicken soup, and bedouins heal themselves with camel's milk.

Italians opt for 'eating white' or '*mangiare in bianco*' a practice which involves eating bowls of sauce-less spaghetti and white rice.

The idea is that these foods are less challenging for the body to digest. Without taxing your digestion you will have the energy needed to fight off what's ailing you.

If you want some flavour you can season the bland dish with olive oil and mercifully, the rules even permit some Parmesan.

While we're always open to learning about foreign food, it's disheartening to receive a lecture when you feel in the mood for a cappuccino after lunch (cue gasps from Italian coffee purists), or to have flatmates critique every dish you try to make and poke fun at your national cuisine.

4) ... and your outfit choices

Before you've even opened your mouth, you might feel like you stand out as a foreigner in Italy due to your clothes, as if you're the only one who wasn't told the dress code.

Italians dress for the season, not the weather. This means that going out with bare legs is practically unheard of outside the months of June, July and August - even on a hot day. As a general rule, you're less likely to see loud prints or 'statement' pieces and far more likely to see tailored, classic styles. And for women, it's practically unheard of to leave the house with wet hair, so if you leave the house in a rush before drying it, you might elicit a few confused glances.

5) Directness

Come to think of it, it's not just food and clothing. Whatever the topic, if an Italian disagrees with you on something, they're likely to let you know in no uncertain terms. Even when done with affection, it can catch newcomers off guard.

Once you get used to the no-nonsense approach though, it's refreshing how people feel able to let their emotions show rather than resorting to fake politeness or passive aggressiveness in order to avoid a scene. Re-adjusting to niceties back home starts to feel frustrating once you've been here long enough.

6) Disregarding your personal space

Whether they're whacking you in the face with a particularly expressive hand gesture, or simply being touchy-feely and going in for a hug two minutes after meeting you, Italians aren't shy about getting up close and personal. Even in more formal business contexts, it's normal to touch people on the arm and shoulder, and if you've got small children, expect to be stopped regularly for strangers to fuss over them.

7) Not tipping

Particularly for Americans, the lack of a tipping culture can be confusing. When you want to show your appreciation for a delicious and good value meal, leaving a few extra coins can feel natural, but in Italy it's not necessary - and you've probably already paid for service in the '*coperto*' (cover charge) if you're somewhere slightly up-market.

8) The bidet

This piece of plumbing is regarded by many foreigners with an air of suspicion, but it's present in almost every single Italian home. It's used for washing your genitals after going to the toilet, and is supposedly more hygienic than just using toilet paper, but if you're bewildered by the whole concept, don't worry - nobody's going to force you to use it.

9) The driving

From Italian host families driving on the wrong side of the road to make an English guest 'feel at home' (yes, it happens) to the persistent overuse of the horn and failure to acknowledge pedestrians, driving is perhaps the most stressful part of Italian life to adjust to and is not recommended for the faint-hearted

10) Persistent flirting

If you're female, expect to be on the receiving end of a few '*ciao bella*'s and to be addressed as '*bellissima*' or '*principessa*' (princess) when you're out and about. This might seem embarrassing to anyone from a more reserved country, but you don't need to read too much into it most of the time - they're simply being polite.

Men and women can both expect potential partners to be more forward when it comes to dating, and when an Italian takes a shine to someone, they are unlikely to 'play it cool' and will often shower you with romantic gestures. If the feeling's mutual, great, but if not, it can be an uncomfortable situation. Even if you've explained you aren't interested or are in a relationship, you might have to be quite firm in order to get the point across (see number five on this list).