

# Beginners' Italian: food and drink

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# Introduction

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In this free course you learn some basic vocabulary relating to food and drinks, greetings and introductions. You practise ordering drinks and snacks in an Italian café. You will also find out about customs to do with food and drink. Listening to Italian speakers in a variety of situations will enable you to practise initial listening skills.

This OpenLearn course provides a taster for studying other Italian short courses at The Open University's [Open Centre for Languages and Cultures](#).

Some activities in this course use an audio-recording tool. This may not work correctly in the Safari browser on Apple Mac computers. Please try another browser such as Google Chrome to run this.

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- take part in simple exchanges when buying drinks and snacks in an Italian café
- understand some customs relating to Italian cafés
- begin to use the indefinite article in Italian.

# 1 Learning the names of drinks in Italian

In this section you find out what some common drinks and snacks are called in Italian, and hear a waiter taking an order from a group of customers.

## Activity 1

Look at this list of drinks and match each drink with its corresponding picture, as in the example. Start with the ones you are already familiar with and try to guess the ones you don't know.

**Example** 1 *un cappuccino* – h



Figure 1

1. un cappuccino
2. un'acqua minerale
3. una birra
4. un caffè
5. un succo di frutta
6. un bicchiere di vino bianco
7. un aperitivo

8. un tè

9. un bicchiere di vino rosso

#### Answer

1 – h; 2 – e; 3 – b; 4 – i; 5 – c; 6 – f; 7 – d; 8 – g; 9 – a

### Activity 2

Now listen to the audio track and repeat aloud the names of the drinks you hear. Try to copy the pronunciation and intonation of the speaker as closely as possible.

Audio content is not available in this format.

### Culture: Coffee drinking in Italy

You may find coffee-drinking traditions in Italy different from those in the UK or in your own culture. If you ask for *un caffè*, you will be served an espresso coffee. A *caffè ristretto* is an espresso which is even more concentrated than usual. An espresso with a tiny amount of milk is a *macchiato*, sometimes described as a *macchiato caldo* (if the milk is hot) or a *macchiato freddo* (if the milk is cold). You might like to try a *caffè corretto*, a coffee with a drop of a spirit or liqueur such as *grappa* in it. For Italians *un cappuccino* is a morning drink only, never taken after a meal. If you want a long coffee, you should ask for *un caffè americano*. Another milky but not so frothy coffee is *un caffelatte*, which is sometimes served in hotels at breakfast. Such is the importance of coffee in Italian life that some customers pay for two coffees, one to drink themselves and one paid for in advance as a charitable act for anyone in need who might drop in in the hope of a free coffee – the so-called *caffè sospeso*.



Figure 2

## 2 Italian pronunciation of *c* and *ch*

This section will guide you in pronouncing some important food and drink words in the the right way.

### Pronunciation: *c*, *ci* and *ch*

The letter *c* has a 'soft' sound before *i* or *e*. It is pronounced /tʃ/, as in the English word 'church':

cappuccino

The letter *c* has a hard sound before *a*, *o* or *u*. It is pronounced /k/, as in the English word 'cat':

caffè

The letter combination *ch* always has a hard sound. It is pronounced /k/, as in the English word 'cat':

bicchiere

Note that the same rule applies regardless whether the word is spelled with a single or a double *c*.

### Activity 3

Now listen to each audio clip below and repeat, paying particular attention to the different ways in which the letter *c* is pronounced.. Record yourself and compare your recording to the original.

1





Figure 3

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2



Figure 4

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3



Figure 5

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

4



Figure 6

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

5



Figure 7

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

6



Figure 8

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

7



Figure 9

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

8



Figure 10

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

### Activity 4

A group of friends are ordering drinks from a waiter. Listen to the audio track and identify the drinks mentioned. Then write down the names of the drinks in Italian.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Provide your answer...

### Answer

The drinks mentioned are: *una birra, un caffè, un bicchiere di vino bianco, un tè* and *un succo di frutta*.

### Culture: *Per favore, grazie, prego*

The expression *per favore* ('please') is used much less often than 'please' is in English. It is not considered impolite to omit *per favore* when asking for something.

On the other hand, *grazie* ('thank you') is used often.

It is customary to respond to *grazie* by saying *prego*. This means 'not at all / you're welcome / don't mention it' (the literal meaning is 'I beg you') but is used more routinely than these equivalent English expressions.

Later you will come across several other meanings of *prego*, which vary according to the context, such as 'Can I help you?', 'Come in', 'Do sit down' and 'After you'.

## 3 Ordering and paying

In this activity you learn and practise the language needed to place an order in a café and you will find out more about *il bar*.

### Activity 5

Maria and Piera have met for breakfast in a café. Listen to the audio track and try to work out what they are ordering. They seem to be placing their order twice. Do you know why that is?

Audio content is not available in this format.

### Answer

The two friends are having a cappuccino (*un cappuccino*), a brioche (*una brioche*), a coffee (*un caffè*) and a cake or pastry (*una pasta*). They pay at the till first and then go to the counter with the receipt and repeat their order.

### Culture: Paying for drinks and snacks

In many bars and cafés, particularly in train stations, airports or more upmarket bars in cities, you go to the cash desk (*la cassa*) first and say what you want. You pay and are given a receipt (*uno scontrino*), which you then give to the person serving, repeating your order. In fact there is often a sign (*un cartello*) telling you to go the cash desk first, pay the cashier (*il cassiere / la cassiera*) and get a till receipt. The sign might say something like *Si prega di fare lo scontrino alla cassa* ('Please obtain a receipt [first] from the till') or simply *Si prega di pagare alla cassa* ('Please pay [first] at the till').

It is also worth remembering that in most cafés in Italian towns there are two sets of prices, both of which, by law, should be clearly displayed: the price you pay standing at the counter (*al banco*) and the price you pay sitting down at a table (*al tavolo*). In smaller towns or rural areas, there is usually only one set of prices and you can sit either inside or outside without paying extra.



Figure 11 Uno scontrino



Figure 12 Un cartello

### Activity 6

The following expressions were used by the speakers in the previous dialogue. Match each expression to its English equivalent, as in the example, and then listen to the audio track again and see if you can hear them.

**Example: 1 – f**

- |             |                          |
|-------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Desidera? | (a) For me               |
| 2 Vorrei    | (b) How can I help?      |
| 3 Per me    | (c) For you              |
| 4 Scusi!    | (d) Here you are!        |
| 5 Mi dica   | (e) Excuse me!           |
| 6 Per Lei   | (f) What would you like? |
| 7 Allora    | (g) I would like         |
| 8 Ecco!     | (h) So ...               |

**Answer**

1 – (f); 2 – (g); 3 – (a); 4 – (e); 5 – (b); 6 – (c); 7 – (h), 8 – (d)

**Language: Ordering drinks**

In an Italian *bar*, the person serving – or the *cassiere* if you have to pay first – will ask you what you want in one of the following ways:

Desidera? *What would you like? (literally: You want?)*

Mi dica. *How can I help? (literally: Tell me.)*

E per Lei? *(And) for you?*

To say what you would like, use:

Vorrei... *I would like ...*

(E) per me... *(And) for me ...*

If you need to attract the waiter's or barman's attention, you say:

Scusi! *Excuse me!*

When the person serving sums up the order to check that they have got it right, they usually begin with:

Allora... *So ...*

When they are serving your order, they are likely to say:

Ecco! *Here you are!*

As a beginner, it is useful to learn common expressions like these as set phrases rather than trying to work out what each word means.

## 3.1 Practising ordering and paying

### Activity 7

Listen to the audio track and repeat the expressions. Try to match the pronunciation and intonation of the speaker as closely as possible.

Desidera?

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

Mi dica.

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

E per Lei?

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

Vorrei...

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

Per me...

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

Scusi!

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

Allora...

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

Ecco!

Voice Recorder is not available in this format.

### Activity 8

Now see if you can use the expressions you've just learned. Complete the dialogue using the following words. The first one has been done for you as an example.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

### Activity 9

Now you can order some drinks yourself. Listen to the audio track and answer the questions following the prompts in English, as in the example below.

Audio content is not available in this format.

#### Example

You hear: *Buongiorno. Desidera?*

(A coffee.)

You say: *Un caffè.*

You hear: *Un caffè.*

### Culture: *Al bar*

*Il bar* is a very important part of Italian life. There are an estimated 121,000 in Italy, usually open from early morning until late evening. The *bar* is more like a café than an English bar, a place where one can drop in for *un caffè* during the working day (the so-called *pausa caffè*) and have a chat with friends and colleagues. Customers often share opinions on a variety of subjects ranging from politics and football, to work, gossip, cinema and fashion.

The Italian *bar* is probably at its busiest first thing in the morning, when people grab a coffee and a *cornetto* ('croissant') at the counter. It is busy again at lunchtime when those not going home for lunch eat a sandwich or a snack. Finally, in the early evening (at the end of the working day) people drop in for an *aperitivo* before dinner. Some people might also come and have a drink or an ice cream later in the evening.

Most bars, however basic, have small tables on the pavement outside where you can sit and watch the world go by and smoke if you want. As in other EU countries, smoking is not permitted inside the bar but is common practice at tables outside.

Another role played by the *bar* is that of a corner shop. Most of them will sell you milk if you run out. The *bar-gelateria* will sell you ice cream by the litre to take home for a special occasion, while at the *bar-pasticceria* you can buy trays of *pasticcini* ('little cakes') or *dolci* such as *tiramisù* to take to friends' homes if you are invited for a meal.

## 4 Gender of nouns

In this section you will learn about the gender of nouns and the forms of the Italian equivalent of English 'a/an'.

In the previous section you heard people ordering *una birra* and *un bicchiere di vino bianco*, among other drinks. In Italian the word for beer (*birra*) is feminine, while the word for glass (*bicchiere*) is masculine. Read the following explanation to find out about Italian nouns and their grammatical gender.

### Language: Nouns and their gender

All Italian nouns have a gender: they are either masculine or feminine.

Knowing the gender of nouns is important since it determines the form of the article ('a' and 'the' in English) that you use with them and the form of the adjectives that describe them.

**Nouns ending in -o** are usually masculine:

un aperitivo *a* *aperitif*  
uno spuntino *a* *snack*

**Nouns ending in -a** are usually feminine:

una birra *a* *beer*  
un'aranciata *a* *orangeade*

**Nouns ending in -e** are not so easy: some are masculine and some are feminine. Where they relate to people, it is easy to guess their gender:

un padre *a* *father (masculine)*  
una madre *a* *mother (feminine)*

In other cases you simply have to learn the gender of each noun rather than follow a rule. For example, *liquore* ('liqueur') is masculine but *lezione* ('lesson') is feminine.

Most words imported into Italian from other languages are masculine:

un caffè *a* *coffee*  
un tè *a* *tea*  
un toast *a* *toasted sandwich*

As for any rule, there are exceptions which you will meet later. If in doubt, a dictionary will tell you the gender of each word.

### Activity 10

Look at the following words and try to work out which ones are masculine and which ones are feminine, using the information above.



un cappuccino una cioccolata un'aranciata un succo una spremuta un aperitivo una birra un amaro uno spuntino una pizza un cornetto una brioche uno scontrino un'acqua minerale una pasta uno spumante

Masculine:

Feminine:

#### Answer

The masculine words are:

un cappuccino, un succo, un aperitivo, un amaro, uno spuntino, un cornetto, uno scontrino, uno spumante.

The feminine words are:

una cioccolata, un'aranciata, una spremuta, una birra, una pizza, una brioche, un'acqua minerale, una pasta.

### Culture: *Amaro* and *spumante*

*Amaro* (literally 'bitter') is a type of liqueur usually made with herbs, which is commonly drunk after dinner as a digestif. It has a strong flavour and a syrupy consistency not unlike cough medicine but may have an alcohol content as high as 40%. *Amaro* is commercially produced in every Italian region, for example *Amaro Averna* in Sicily and *Amaro Montenegro* in Emilia Romagna, just to name but two. Many of the recipes for it originated in monasteries.

*una spremuta a freshly squeezed juice*

*Amaro* is typically drunk neat but can also be drunk on ice.

*Spumante* is a sparkling wine. Sparkling wines are made throughout Italy but the best-known are probably *Asti* from Piedmont, *Lambrusco* from Emilia Romagna and *Prosecco* from Veneto.

## 5 The indefinite article in Italian

You'll need to know how to say 'a' (or 'an') in Italian.

### Language: Indefinite article *un/uno/una/un'*

The Italian equivalent of English 'a' or 'an' (the indefinite article) is either *un*, *uno*, *una* or *un'*. The form depends on whether the noun it relates to is masculine or feminine and whether the noun starts with a vowel (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*) or a consonant.

#### Masculine nouns

Use *un* with most masculine nouns:

un bicchiere    *a glass*  
un aperitivo    *an aperitif*

Use *uno* before a masculine noun beginning with *s* + consonant (for example *sc-*, *sp-*):

uno scontrino    *a receipt*  
uno spuntino    *a snack*

Use *uno* before a masculine noun beginning with *gn*, *pn*, *ps*, *x*, *z*, or with *i* or *y* followed by another vowel:

uno zio    *an uncle*  
uno yogurt    *a yogurt*

#### Feminine nouns

Use *una* with a feminine noun beginning with a consonant:

una birra    *a beer*  
una pizza    *a pizza*

Use *un'* before a feminine noun beginning with a vowel:

un'aranciata    *an orangeade*  
un'acqua minerale    *a mineral water*

### Activity 11

From following the explanation above, add the appropriate indefinite article *un*, *uno*, *una* or *un'* to each of the following words.

**Example: *un gelato***

___ acqua minerale	___ succo di frutta
___ vino bianco	___ amaro
___ scontrino	___ bar

___ pasta	___ acqua gassata
___ espresso	___ succo di mela
___ spumante	___ aranciata
___ pizza	___ cornetto

### Answer

<b>un'</b> acqua minerale	<b>un</b> succo di frutta
<b>un</b> vino bianco	<b>un</b> amaro
<b>uno</b> scontrino	<b>un</b> bar
<b>una</b> pasta	<b>un'</b> acqua gassata
<b>un</b> espresso	<b>un</b> succo di mela
<b>uno</b> spumante	<b>un'</b> aranciata
<b>una</b> pizza	<b>un</b> cornetto

## 6 Famous cafés

In this activity you are going to be introduced to some historic Italian coffee houses.

### Activity 12

Listen to the audio track and write down the town in which each *caffè* is located.

Audio content is not available in this format.

- 1 Caffè Fiorio:
- 2 Caffè Gambrinus:
- 3 Caffè Florian:
- 4 Caffè Greco:
- 5 Caffè San Marco:

### Answer

1. Caffè Fiorio: **Torino (Turin)**
2. Caffè Gambrinus: **Napoli (Naples)**
3. Caffè Florian: **Venezia (Venice)**
4. Caffè Greco: **Roma (Rome)**
5. Caffè San Marco: **Trieste (Trieste)**

### Skills: Listening to longer extracts

Listening to longer authentic recordings is a good way of building up your listening skills, but you shouldn't worry if you only catch some of the words or only get a very general idea of what is being talked about. The context or instructions will help you form an idea of what to expect and, depending on the purpose of the exercise, it may be enough to listen for the gist, or you may want to focus on understanding specific information. Remember that you can do this without understanding every word; even when you listen to something in your own language you will find that you rarely hear every word, unless you are really concentrating on the message.

Here are two items of vocabulary used in the activity below.



Figure 13 Una sfogliatella



Figure 14 Un babà

### Activity 13

Listen to the audio track again and match each café with its speciality (*la specialità*).

Audio content is not available in this format.

gelato e cioccolata calda

sfogliatelle e babà

liquore al caffè

focaccia di polenta

aperitivi e spuntini

Match each of the items above to an item below.

1. Caffè Fiorio
2. Caffè Gambrinus
3. Caffè Florian
4. Caffè Greco
5. Caffè San Marco

### Culture: Historic Italian coffee houses

The history of the *Gran Caffè* in Italy goes back to the introduction of coffee into Europe in the early seventeenth century. The first European coffee houses were established in Venice, a centre of trade between Italy and the East. The coffee houses were a meeting place for intellectuals and artists, and often became cultural landmarks. A few famous examples are the Gran Caffè Gambrinus in Naples (1860), favoured by Oscar Wilde, Ernest Hemingway and Jean-Paul Sartre, the Florian in Venice (1720), frequented by Giacomo Casanova and Charles Dickens, the Caffè Pedrocchi in Padua (1831), the Caffè degli Specchi in Trieste (1839), the Caffè Greco in Rome (1760), haunt of Richard Wagner and Orson Welles, and the Caffè Fiorio in Turin (1780), whose customers included Cavour and Nietzsche.



Figure 15

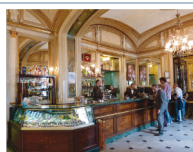


Figure 16



Figure 17



## Conclusion

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We hope you have enjoyed this course. You have learned about the importance of coffee drinking – and *il bar!* – in Italian life and have been introduced to some famous Italian cafes. You have also learned how to ask for a coffee in Italian and how to say *per favore* and *grazie*. We hope you'll now take every opportunity to use the language you've learned and to explore some Italian cafés for yourself, in Italy or where you live.

This OpenLearn course provides a taster for studying other Italian short courses at The Open University's [Open Centre for Languages and Cultures](#).

## Take the next step



If you enjoyed this course, why not explore the subject further with our paid-for short course, *Beginners Italian 1: primi passi*?

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