

CHOW ITALIANO

When Not in Rome...

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Shrimp scampi, pepperoni pizza, mozzarella sticks, marinara sauce, veal parmigiana, spaghetti and meatballs. Those are some of the “Italian” foods you’d be hard-pressed to find in Italy, according to Fodors.com.

No matter. Americans seem to love what restaurants *call* Italian food. But how much damage does it do to our waistlines and arteries?

From breadsticks to tiramisu—with plenty of cheese, meat, and white-flour pasta in between—Italian has never been confused with spa cuisine. But in recent years, restaurants have fattened the pot, deep-frying their lasagna and ravioli, pouring alfredo sauce on anything that doesn’t move, and selling platters with two or three entrées. The food—and the diners—just keeps getting heavier.

Of course, some restaurants offer lower-calorie dishes for patrons who don’t want to roll out the door looking like a meatball. Olive Garden, the largest full-service Italian chain in the country, has a Lighter Italian Fare menu with seven entrées that have less than 575 calories. And menus at Carrabba’s Italian Grill and Romano’s Macaroni Grill highlight dishes with less than 600 calories. (Most are still loaded with salt. Sigh.) At other chains, like Maggiano’s Little Italy, it would be a challenge to find any entrées below 600 calories.

Here’s a sampling of items from those four chains. The numbers—we took them from the companies’ Web sites—are likely to reflect what you’d get in similar dishes at similar restaurants. But wherever you eat Italian, you can use our tips on page 15 to slim down the usual fare.

The information for this article was compiled by Paige Einstein.

APPETIZERS

CARRABBA’S TOMATOES CAPRESE

Calories 450 • Sat fat 18 grams • Sodium 340 mg

“Fresh milk mozzarella with sliced tomatoes, red onions, fresh basil and a balsamic reduction” keeps the sodium admirably low. And it’s one of the few dishes not loaded with white flour. Share it with others to dilute nearly a day’s sat fat.

MAGGIANO’S BRUSCHETTA

Calories 560 • Sat fat 10 grams • Sodium 920 mg

Half a dozen pieces of buttered toast topped with fresh tomatoes, basil, balsamic vinegar, and roasted garlic. Olive Garden’s nine-piece order swaps the butter for oil, so the sat fat drops to just 3 grams. But you’ll be starting dinner with 950 calories’ worth of white flour and close to a two-day supply of sodium. Ugh.

OLIVE GARDEN PARMESAN OLIVE FRITTA WITH GORGONZOLA CREAM SAUCE

Calories 560 • Sat fat 11 grams • Sodium 980 mg

WITH CITRUS AIOLI SAUCE
Calories 710 • Sat fat 12 grams • Sodium 850 mg

“A bite-sized blend of olives and Italian cheeses, rolled together and lightly fried.” Translation: deep-fried olive-and-cheese balls with an oil or cream sauce. Ordering the Crispy Risotto Bites (deep-fried cheese-and-rice balls) instead drops the calories to 350 and the sat fat to 4 grams, but the sodium is about the same.

MAGGIANO’S STUFFED MUSHROOMS

Calories 600 • Sat fat 26 grams • Sodium 1,280 mg

Butter gives Maggiano’s mushrooms about twice the calories—and five times the sat fat—of Olive Garden’s version. Macaroni Grill’s hit 640 calories and 15 grams of sat fat thanks to the Italian sausage and goat cheese filling.

OLIVE GARDEN GRILLED CHICKEN FLATBREAD

Calories 760 • Sat fat 15 grams • Sodium 1,500 mg

“Chicken, mozzarella, roasted red peppers and basil with alfredo and garlic spread.” Flatbread pizza may sound healthy, but it’s loaded with calories from the same white flour, cheese, and alfredo sauce that may well show up in your entrée.



CARRABBA’S CALAMARI

WITH HOUSEMADE MARINARA
Calories 940 • Sat fat 13 grams • Sodium 1,960 mg

WITH SPICY ITALIAN PEPPER AND
LEMON BUTTER SAUCE
Calories 1,510 • Sat fat 53 grams • Sodium 2,130 mg

Who can afford to share roughly 1,000 or 1,500 calories—mostly from the frying oil and the breading that entombs the squid—before dinner? The calamari with lemon butter sauce (and its 2½-day load of sat fat) should come with a defibrillator.

OLIVE GARDEN LASAGNA FRITTA

Calories 1,030 • Sat fat 21 grams • Sodium 1,590 mg

“Parmesan-breaded lasagna pieces, fried and served over alfredo sauce, topped with parmesan cheese and marinara sauce.” Do you need a new appetizer for your restaurant? No problem. Just deep-fry an old dish and add alfredo sauce! Nothing like 1,000 calories and a day’s sat fat and sodium to start a meal.

PASTA

OLIVE GARDEN
CHEESE RAVIOLI**WITH MARINARA SAUCE****Calories 660 • Sat fat 11 grams • Sodium 1,440 mg****WITH MEAT SAUCE****Calories 790 • Sat fat 14 grams • Sodium 1,510 mg**

It's not just the cheese inside, but the melted cheese on top, that gives ravioli with marinara half a day's sat fat. Still, it's hard to find pasta dishes with only 660 calories. Get it with meat sauce, though, and the calories rise to ravioli-with-cream-sauce territory. Olive Garden's meat sauce delivers a double whammy; it's made with beef and Italian sausage...and sausage promotes colon cancer.

OLIVE GARDEN
WHOLE WHEAT LINGUINE**WITH FRESH TOMATO POMODORO****Calories 670 • Sat fat 3 grams • Sodium 1,390 mg****WITH SPICY DIAVOLO****Calories 680 • Sat fat 6 grams • Sodium 900 mg**

Stick with the Pomodoro (240 calories) or Diavolo sauce (250) atop your Cucina Mia "create your own pasta" 100% Whole Wheat Linguine (430). Carrabba's whole-grain Spaghetti with Pomodoro sauce is in the same ballpark. Want a topping? The Sautéed Shrimp adds 730 mg of extra sodium, but 15 grams of protein and only 70 calories.

OLIVE GARDEN**SPAGHETTI WITH MEAT SAUCE****Calories 710 • Sat fat 8 grams • Sodium 1,340 mg**

A hefty pile of white-flour pasta and salty beef-and-sausage-laden sauce isn't the healthiest meal. Carrabba's version (with beef and pork) has fewer calories (530), while Maggiano's (just beef) has more (1,060). It mostly comes down to how much pasta the kitchen staff dishes out.

**CARRABBA'S**
LASAGNE**Calories 760 • Sat fat 24 grams • Sodium 2,480 mg**

It's like eating a Pizza Hut Personal Pan Pepperoni Pizza with 20 extra slices of pepperoni. Olive Garden's Lasagna Classico is roughly as bad. But Maggiano's Mom's Lasagna with meat sauce could well make Mom a widow. Who needs 1,170 calories, 1½ days' sat fat (34 grams), and a two-day supply of sodium (3,550 mg) in their entrée?

**MAGGIANO'S**
MUSHROOM RAVIOLI AL FORNO**Calories 820 • Sat fat 24 grams • Sodium 2,140 mg**

If only ravioli stuffed with mushrooms weren't served with alfredo or some other cream sauce. That pushes the sat fat to high (17 grams in Olive Garden's Ravioli di Portobello), higher (24 grams in Maggiano's Mushroom Ravioli al Forno), or really high (31 grams in Macaroni Grill's Mushroom Ravioli). The cream sauce makes the Lobster Ravioli at Macaroni Grill no better.

CARRABBA'S
SHRIMP AND SCALLOP
LINGUINE ALLA VODKA**Calories 860 • Sat fat 14 grams • Sodium 1,400 mg**

"Sautéed shrimp and scallops tossed with linguine in our housemade vodka tomato cream sauce." Healthy seafood doesn't stand a chance against a plate of white-flour pasta topped with what's closer to a cream sauce than a tomato sauce.

OLIVE GARDEN
SPAGHETTI WITH MEAT SAUCE
AND MEATBALLS**Calories 920 • Sat fat 14 grams • Sodium 1,770 mg**

Nearly 1,000 calories of white flour, beef, and sausage (it's in the meat sauce) threaten your heart, waistline, and colon. Trade in the meatballs for chicken meatballs and you'll trim the sat fat (to 10 grams), but not the calories (960) or sodium (1,840 mg). Whatever you do, don't swap for Italian sausage (1,270 calories, 24 grams of sat fat, and 3,090 mg of sodium).

MAGGIANO'S
CHICKEN & SPINACH
MANICOTTI**Calories 970 • Sat fat 31 grams • Sodium 1,770 mg**

Don't blame the chicken or spinach for the 1½ days' supply of sat fat. It's all those Italian cheeses and the asiago cream sauce.

OLIVE GARDEN
FIVE CHEESE ZITI AL FORNO**Calories 1,050 • Sat fat 26 grams • Sodium 2,370 mg**

"Ziti pasta in a five cheese marinara sauce, baked with a layer of melted Italian cheeses" is one heavy dish for heavy-to-be diners. But the Italian sausage in Maggiano's Taylor Street Baked Ziti helps kick the calories up to 1,400, the sat fat to 30 grams, and the sodium to the saltosphere (4,080 mg).

OLIVE GARDEN
CHICKEN & SHRIMP
CARBONARA**Calories 1,210 • Sat fat 35 grams • Sodium 2,270 mg**

Want to ruin your chicken and shrimp? Surround them with white flour and "a creamy parmesan sauce with bacon." You end up with 300 more calories than Olive Garden's Spaghetti with Meat Sauce and Meatballs...and more than twice the sat fat. Maggiano's Chef KB's Lobster Carbonara hits 1,740 calories and (hold on to your arteries) 4,010 mg of sodium.

OLIVE GARDEN
CHICKEN ALFREDO**Calories 1,440 • Sat fat 48 grams • Sodium 2,070 mg**

When Olive Garden's top-selling menu item has this many calories, is it any wonder we've got an obesity epidemic? The sauce has enough butter, cream, and parmesan to supply 2½ days' worth of sat fat. It's like ordering two Outback Steakhouse 14 oz. New York Strip steaks. "Alfredo" in the name of any pasta dish means at least 1,000 calories, 1½ days' sat fat, and a day's sodium en route to your insides. Mayday. Mayday.

MAGGIANO'S
SHRIMP SCAMPI**Calories 1,680 • Sat fat 28 grams • Sodium 2,490 mg**

Shrimp sautéed with tomatoes, garlic, and lemon butter, served with angel hair pasta tossed with butter, olive oil, and garlic. Shrimp is so low in sat fat and calories that you might think a little butter can't hurt. Wrong. To your arteries and waistline, this dish looks like three Big Macs.

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UNDER 600 CALORIES

OLIVE GARDEN

BAKED TILAPIA WITH SHRIMP

Calories 340 • Sat fat 5 grams • Sodium 1,070 mg

"Oven-baked white fish and shrimp with a white wine sauce," served with garlic broccoli. You can't beat the calories. The dish has roughly half the calories and sat fat of Olive Garden's Parmesan Crusted Tilapia with roasted asparagus. And you have a shot at leaving the restaurant without blowing an entire day's sodium. Well done!

MACARONI GRILL

GRILLED CHICKEN SPIEDINI

Calories 410 • Sat fat 2 grams • Sodium 990 mg

Grilled chicken and vegetables is a steal (assuming the chef doesn't overdo the oil). Now that's Mediterranean fare.

OLIVE GARDEN

CENTER CUT FILET MIGNON

Calories 440 • Sat fat 9 grams • Sodium 1,470 mg

If you want red meat, this 6 oz. filet is a bargain. It's got half the calories and sat fat of the chain's Steak Toscano because it's half the size and comes with vegetables instead of garlic parmesan mashed potatoes. Too bad neither dish is low in sodium.

OLIVE GARDEN

SEAFOOD BRODETTO

Calories 480 • Sat fat 3 grams • Sodium 2,250 mg

"Scallops, shrimp and delicate tilapia with spinach and mushrooms simmered in a light white wine and marinara-saffron broth. Served with toasted ciabatta bread." Skip the bread and leave some of the broth behind to save some white flour and sodium.

CARRABBA'S

WOOD-GRILLED SALMON

Calories 500 • Sat fat 6 grams • Sodium 880 mg

It's only 500 calories if you order the smaller (6 oz.) portion and get steamed spinach as your side. Olive Garden's Herb-Grilled Salmon comes with seasoned broccoli, yet the entire dish has a mere 500 mg of sodium. Bravo!



CHICKEN, SHRIMP, ETC.

CARRABBA'S

SHRIMP RISOTTO

Calories 540 • Sat fat 11 grams • Sodium 2,420 mg

"Sautéed shrimp and light tomato risotto" (rice cooked in broth) is only light compared to other menu items. It's still high in salt and refined carbs, but you could do a lot worse.

OLIVE GARDEN

EGGPLANT PARMIGIANA

Calories 850 • Sat fat 10 grams • Sodium 1,900 mg

Breaded, fried, topped with marinara, mozzarella, and parmesan and served with a side of pasta. That's no way to treat a vegetable. But it still beats the chain's Chicken Parmigiana, with 1,090 calories and almost twice the sat fat (18 grams) and sodium (3,380 mg).

CARRABBA'S

VEAL MARSALA

WITH GARLIC MASHED POTATOES

Calories 880 • Sat fat 28 grams • Sodium 1,670 mg

"Sautéed and topped with mushrooms, prosciutto and our housemade Lombardo Marsala wine sauce." Chicken Marsala is similar. Roughly half of the calories and sat fat come from the garlic mashed potatoes. Trade it for the vegetable of the day and you drop to around 620 calories and "only" 17 grams of sat fat and 1,060 mg of sodium.

MAGGIANO'S

CHICKEN PICCATA

Calories 1,160 • Sat fat 23 grams • Sodium 2,290 mg

Chicken breasts sautéed with capers and lemon butter, served with pasta with butter, olive oil, and garlic. Oh dear. The sauce gives this classic chicken dish as many calories as Maggiano's Spaghetti & Meatball with meat sauce (and twice the sat fat). The Veal Piccata ups the sat fat to 30 grams.

MACARONI GRILL

MAMA'S TRIO

Calories 1,430 • Sat fat 30 grams • Sodium 3,430 mg

Not sure which entrée to order? Why not get three: say, Chicken Parmesan, Lasagna Bolognese, and Chicken & Mushroom Cannelloni? How sensible. Olive Garden swaps the cannelloni for Fettuccine Alfredo and calls it a Tour of Italy. The damage is similar.

MAGGIANO'S

PRIME NEW YORK STEAK

Calories 1,510 • Sat fat 46 grams • Sodium 3,030 mg

Maggiano's serves its 1 lb. fatty steak with fried potatoes. And it serves your poor arteries more than enough sat fat for today and tomorrow. Would you sit down to two Pizza Hut Ultimate Cheese Lovers Personal Pan Pizzas topped with 7 pats of butter? You pretty much just did.

MAGGIANO'S

CHICKEN SALTIMBOCCA

Calories 1,690 • Sat fat 28 grams • Sodium 3,370 mg

How to turn chicken breasts into belly fat? Bread them, then top with prosciutto and provolone and serve with buttered and oiled pasta.



UNDER 600 CALORIES

OLIVE GARDEN CHICKEN ABRUZZI

Calories 540 • Sat fat 6 grams • Sodium 1,850 mg

Chicken, cannellini beans, kale, and garden vegetables...what's not to love? The more than a day's supply of sodium. Still (sad to say), that's no worse than most other Italian restaurant dishes.

OLIVE GARDEN GARLIC ROSEMARY CHICKEN

Calories 540 • Sat fat 7 grams • Sodium 1,560 mg

"Grilled marinated chicken breasts topped with rosemary and caramelized garlic cloves," with garlic parmesan mashed potatoes and fresh spinach. Delish. If only Olive Garden could trim the salt.

MACARONI GRILL POLLO CAPRESE

Calories 560 • Sat fat 7 grams • Sodium 1,530 mg

Grilled chicken breast and capellini pomodoro, topped with a few dollops of mozzarella and served with an arugula salad. If Italian isn't Italian without at least some pasta, this dish should be on your short list.

OLIVE GARDEN LASAGNA PRIMAVERA WITH GRILLED CHICKEN

Calories 560 • Sat fat 10 grams • Sodium 1,700 mg

"Hand-folded lasagna filled with zucchini, squash and bell peppers, topped with a tomato-basil sauce, grilled chicken and a creamy parmesan drizzle." It trounces the chain's Lasagna Classico on calories (850), sat fat (25 grams), and sodium (2,830 mg), thanks to less pasta and cheese and no beef.

DESSERTS

CARRABBA'S MINI CANNOLI

Calories 500 • Sat fat 34 grams • Sugar 11½ tsp.

"Two crisp mini pastry shells stuffed with sweet ricotta and chocolate chip filling, topped with pistachios and powdered sugar." Each mini cannoli has nearly a day's sat fat.

CARRABBA'S PANNA COTTA

Calories 560 • Sat fat 27 grams • Sugar 5½ tsp.

"Housemade Madagascar vanilla bean custard with fresh raspberries" may sound like a light dessert, but it's like eating an 8 oz. tub of Kraft Philadelphia Original Cream Cheese Spread sprinkled with 4 teaspoons of sugar.

MAGGIANO'S TIRAMISU

Calories 820 • Sat fat 31 grams • Sugar 12½ tsp.

"Ladyfingers soaked in espresso with mascarpone cheese." You're looking at more calories than the Tiramisu at Olive Garden (510) or Macaroni Grill (690), but it pales in comparison to Carrabba's version (1,060). Olive Garden's Amaretto Tiramisu Dolcini cuts the calories to 240 and the sat fat to 9 grams because it's tiny.

OLIVE GARDEN WHITE CHOCOLATE RASPBERRY CHEESECAKE

Calories 890 • Sat fat 36 grams • Sugar NA

Congrats. You've just finished your meal with the equivalent of a Dairy Queen Banana Split topped with half a stick of melted butter. And Maggiano's New York Style Cheesecake, with its 1,130 calories and 47 grams of artery gunk, lays the groundwork for an entirely new layer of belly.

TIPS

1. Bread. Leave it in the basket. You'll save 150 to 300 calories' worth of white flour.

2. Soup. Skip it to dodge 1,000 to 2,000 mg of sodium. Get a salad instead for less sodium (400 to 800 mg with dressing) and more potassium-rich veggies.

3. Light menu. Items that are marked as "light" or "lower calorie" typically have 600 calories or less (though they're usually still loaded with sodium).

4. Pasta sauce. Order tomato-based sauces like marinara, pomodoro, arrabiata, or diavolo (around 200 calories) over alfredo, cream, pesto, or butter (at least 500 calories).

5. Protein toppings. Seafood is best. Meat sauce beats meatballs. Sausage is worst.

6. Sides. Get veggies (50 to 200 calories) instead of potatoes (200 to 500) or pasta (300 to 700).

7. Size. Order a lunch portion for about a third less calories, sat fat, and sodium. Or split an ordinary entrée.

8. Drinks. A glass of Chianti or Prosecco adds about 150 calories. Every glass of sangria adds about 250.

CARRABBA'S SOGNO DI CIOCCOLATA

Calories 1,190 • Sat fat 35 grams • Sugar 22 tsp.

"A rich fudge brownie with chocolate mousse, fresh whipped cream and housemade chocolate sauce." Memo to fat cells and arteries: Make room for nearly two days' sat fat and almost half a cup of (mostly) added sugar—about what you'd get in a whole box of Girl Scout Thin Mints.

MAGGIANO'S APPLE CROSTADA

Calories 1,330 • Sat fat 40 grams • Sugar 23½ tsp.

Granny Smith apples baked in a buttery pastry crust, dipped in cream and crystallized sugar, and served with caramel sauce and a scoop of vanilla bean ice cream. Why not save some money and head to McDonald's for five Baked Apple Pies plus a Vanilla Cone? They'll do about the same damage. 🍏

