

# LA DOLCE VITA NICOISE STYLE

IT'S EXACTLY 150 YEARS SINCE THE NICOIS SHRUGGED OFF THEIR ITALIAN AFFILIATION AND VOTED TO BECOME PART OF FRANCE. BUT JUST HOW ITALIAN IS NICE TODAY?

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 NIGEL RICHES

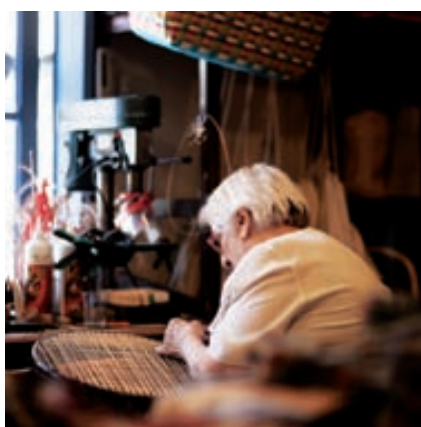
#### LOCATION

Cours Saleya market. Thierry's sweet stall is in front of Le Flore Café in the Old Town market area every day except Monday and Wednesday

Dress, sunglasses and purse from Custo Barcelona; headscarf from Miss Selfridge; earrings and bracelets from Accessorize







## RAISED IN MILAN, I FELT UNIQUELY

comfortable in this corner of France from my first teenage visit. Long weekends morphed into week-long holidays. In 2005, I slipped definitively over the border and have been an honorary Niçoise ever since.

Nice isn't synonymous with châteaux, vineyards and other Gallic trappings. Unlike Lyon, for example, it can't claim to be France's gastronomic capital. And it certainly doesn't claim *vrais Français* status, à la Paris. In fact, with an Italian-sounding dialect, Italianate architecture and plates of local pasta, I found myself wondering, how truly French is this place after all?

Where better to begin my investigation into my adopted city's identity than Nice's 300-year-old *Vieille Ville*, or Old Town. Plunging past Italian-owned *La Voglia* (2 *Rue St Françoise de Paulè*), its trendy décor belying the fact that it's one of the most sublime – and authentic – eateries in town, I realise how very many Italian restaurants,

shops and delis dot this tangle of twisting *rues*, neither overrun by boulangeries nor morphed into bistros.

I weave through the Cours Saleya's flower and produce market (Tuesdays–Sundays, with antiques and *brocante*, or bric a brac, stealing the stall space on Mondays). Here, Nice seems as colourful as any town just over the Italian border: piles of cherries and melons, sundried tomatoes and jars of pesto, tiny marzipan figs and rows of iridescent candied fruit, all back-dropped by Franco-Italian market-day grunts: “*oui*”, “*si*”, “*merci*” and “*ciao*”.

Gorging on my slice of Niçois pizza – anchovy, olive and onion-topped *pissaladière* – I head to Place Pierre Gautier. It's here that the opulent Palais des Ducs de Savoie functioned as former headquarters for the Duchy of Savoy, Italian rulers of Nice until the French piled in 150 years ago. Like all streets in the Old Town, the square proudly displays its name in both French and Nissart, Nice's local language: *Plassa dou Gouvernou*, or Government Square, in this case. A close cousin to the Ligurian dialect spoken >

**LOCATION**  
130-year-old basket shop Le Palais d'Osier (3 Rue de la Préfecture)

Broderie Anglaise jacket from DKNY; dress and headscarf from Figleaves; corsage flowers and crochet handbag from Chanel





## HISTORY OF NICE

The Comté de Nice – the region between the Southern Alps and the Mediterranean Sea – was part of Italy for 500 years. It threw in its lot with the Duchy of Savoy in 1388, the latter morphing into the Kingdom of Sardinia during the 18th century. Italian was Nice's official language, and the region's culture and cuisine developed in tandem with those in neighbouring Ligurian settlements.

Born in Nice's port neighbourhood in 1807, Giuseppe Garibaldi spearheaded the Italian Unification movement through the 1850s. A statue of the great man lies in Place Garibaldi, just outside the Old Town. In 1860, in desperate need of additional troops in Lombardy, the Kingdom of Sardinia essentially swapped Nice in return for French military assistance against the Austrian Empire. Although a treaty was signed, in April 1860 locals were told they must vote as to whether Nice should remain part of the Kingdom of Sardinia, or join France. A blinding 86% majority sided with the French, although this statistic – as well as the legality of the vote – is heavily debated.

Italian Unification may have been a great success, with the Italian Republic officially established in 1861, but Garibaldi was crushed when his hometown became officially "French", and never returned to Nice again.

For more local history, visit Musée Masséna's summer exhibition, *Au Temps des Crinolines – Nice 1860*. 65 Rue de France or 35 Promenade des Anglais, tel: +33 (0)4 9391 1910, [musee-massena-nice.org](http://musee-massena-nice.org).



**LOCATION**

Cours Saleya market. The flower market at Cours Saleya takes place every day except Monday, when the antique dealers take over

Dress from Erdem at [start-london.com](http://start-london.com); socks from American Apparel; shoes from Wallis; sunglasses, pearl necklace and sequin handbag from Chanel; bracelets and earrings from Accessorize

*LOCATION*  
Italian deli counter,  
Rue Droite

Dress from Letarte;  
sequin jacket  
from DKNY; bag  
and sunglasses  
from Chanel

SPICE UP  
YOUR SUMMER  
WITH A SWEET  
AND DARING  
MIX OF  
GEOMETRIC  
PRINTS,  
EXPLOSIVE  
COLOURS  
AND FLOWERY  
MOTIFS







**LOCATION**  
Above left and opposite, Fenocchio ice cream parlour; above right, Rue de la Préfecture

**THIS PAGE**  
Top and necklace from Paul & Joe; trousers, glasses and gladiator sandals from Miss Selfridge; socks and purple headband from American Apparel; bangles from Accessorize

**OPPOSITE**  
Dress and earrings from Moschino; headband from Miss Selfridge; necklace from Paul & Joe; handbag from Armand Basi

40km to the east, Nissart has experienced a recent revival. As if to prove the point, I wander under a heated Nissart shouting match, taking place from window to window high above my head.

A minute later I'm in café-strewn Place Rossetti, recently restored in honour of Nice's 150 years of French rule. The domed Cathédrale Sainte-Réparate dominates the square and is the Old Town's most obvious architectural example of dozens of 17th-century Italianate buildings. At the base of the church's distinctly Italian bell tower, a plaque commemorates Niçois soldiers who died during World War I. Most of their surnames are unmistakably Italian: Bianchi, Buonafede, Vivaldi.

Across the square, Fenocchio (2 Place Rossetti) is the city's place of ice cream pilgrimage. Boasting 99 flavours that run the gamut from divine (Turin's gianduja chocolate) to downright weird (olive anyone?), this buzzing spot was set up by Joseph and Louise Fenocchio, a couple of Piedmontese immigrants, in 1966. Business may be business, but I'm not surprised to see traditional Italian family

values still a priority. Today, son Francis, his wife Giselda and grandson Frédéric, ably assisted by a slew of loyal Italian staff, scoop up thousands of cones each day.

At Place Garibaldi, the apex in the Old Town's triangle, seafood specialist Grand Café de Turin (5 Place Garibaldi) occupies an old post office. It was here that mail destined for Italy was sorted and sent east. Since 1908, this spot's magnetic pull has functioned in reverse. Year-round, day-tripping Italians stake out the terrace's top tables, ordering towering pyramids of oysters, quivering mussels and crimson crabs on ice. Such is Italian market demand that last year the Grand Café's French owner, a seventh-generation oyster farmer, opened the petite annex Turinissimo next door, specialising in fishy antipasti (octopus salad) and pasta dishes (prawn orecchiette).

It seems that Italians have set up some of Nice's most enduring establishments and patronise them to the hilt. Trying to smooth this snarl of history and ethnicity, I find only more questions: where does Italian influence end, French begin and Niçois enter the picture? >



**LOCATION**

Above, Cours Saleya market; opposite, Boulevard Jean-Jaurès

**THIS PAGE**

Dress from Julian J Smith, sunglasses from Cutler and Gross and bag from Calabrese, all at [start-london.com](http://start-london.com); gloves from Sermoneta

**OPPOSITE**

Cashmere cardigan from House of Cashmere; dress from Liquorish; socks, stylist's own; shoes from Georgina Goodman; sunglasses and corsage flower from Chanel; gloves from Sermoneta; bag from Miss Selfridge; vintage belt from Prada

Dipping down onto Rue de la Boucherie, I pass Clé aux Pâtes (8 Rue de la Boucherie), an artisanal pasta store. Trays of fresh spaghetti, gnocchi and ravioli sit alongside pale *panisse*, a firm, steamed chickpea purée that's fried for chips or diced in salads. Scrub out my surroundings and I'd be convinced I'd landed back in Italy. But these tasty morsels are Niçois through and through, and include a local version of crushed basil and garlic *pistou* (a variation on Ligurian pesto). *Socca*, a chickpea-flour pancake, similar to thin, savoury *farinata* from Savona, is sold nearby. Unlike in northern France – a land of butter and complex sauces – cuisine along this southern strip has always made the most of simple, seasonal ingredients. The arid, coastal terraces also feed scores of olive trees, making the tangy green-tinged oil ubiquitous.

Rue de la Boucherie feeds into Rue du Marché. Tucked among the souvenir stores, gLOVEme (5 Rue du Marché) purveys a fine line in butter-soft lamb's leather gloves. Owned by the Claudiano family, master glove-makers for four decades, the

shop's wares are still stretched and stitched by hand in Naples.

Armando Olivella, gLOVEme's marketing manager, is another Niçois convert. When he transferred here a year and a half ago, he expected to flounder with French bureaucracy as the only Neapolitan in Nice. Instead he tells me: "This place is full of Italians! Some have moved here for work, but there are also so many second-generation Italians here too." Armando created the hugely popular website [esprititalien.com](http://esprititalien.com), supplying a list of events and information to a thriving Italian community. How different is Nice to Naples? "The French system is so much more efficient. No matter how many times I've seen them, I'm still cracked-up by boats that 'wash' the coastline every day. It's not Napoli!"

Threading through Place du Palais, I head to the Promenade des Anglais. Local artist Bernar Venet's 30m-high sculpture, *Neuf Lignes Obliques* is positioned on this wide sunny esplanade, between the seafront and Nice's Town Hall. It was inaugurated on 31 May – a celebration >



attended by French President Nicolas Sarkozy – and serves to remind me again of Nice’s 1860 union with France.

Which makes me wonder: what if Nice had remained instead part of Italy? I pose the question to Valeria Mendolia from *La Spezia*, author of *convivio-rital.blogspot.com*, a blog that flags up real Italian bars and restaurants along the French coast. “Well for one, you can bet that the Promenade des Anglais would have been transformed into Piedmont’s port.” Like Armando, she counts Nice lucky to be part of France. “Tourism developed instead. The region is wealthier, and wages are way higher compared to Italy.”

If there’s one thing all Italians in Nice crave, it’s good coffee. It’s bizarrely elusive in France, and believe me, as a Milanese, I know. I stop at Caffetteria Vergnano 1882 (*Zone Piétonne, 11 Rue Halevy*) for a cherished, utterly perfect cappuccino, before strolling west along the promenade to BEFeD Brew Pub (*5 Promenade des Anglais*). Freshly opened in June and the city’s newest Italian addition, the pub serves BEFeD’s speciality beers, produced

at its microbrewery in Mestre near Venice, alongside buckets of peanuts, roasted chicken and chips.

Marlene Cattani, manager of BEFeD, is from Santa Margherita Ligure, close to Portofino, just a few hours across the border. She may have moved to Nice when she was four years old, but she spends all her holidays in Italy and considers herself Italian. “People are more positive in Italy. They make you feel welcome and effortlessly include you. But at the end of the day, the Niçois were once Italians. We’re all really the same, anyway.”

And with that, I know my quest to be over. Nice may gleam under a good sprinkling of French efficiency, but its cuisine and culture owes its heart to Italy. The city’s rather apt coat of arms is an eagle with its feet planted in two different lands. It looks as if the Niçois plucked the best bits of both.

**LOCATION**

Clockwise from above right, Clé aux Pâtes artisan pasta shop; oysters at Café de Turin

Top from Paul & Joe; shorts from Accessorize; sunglasses and bracelets from Chanel

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