



THE LOVE ITALY GUIDE N. 004

Italian Hand Gestures

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There is a gesture Italians make by pinching all five fingertips together, pointing them upward, and shaking the hand slightly - often glossed abroad as "chef's kiss," though it really means something closer to "what do you want?" or "what are you talking about?" Linguists sometimes call it the *mano a borsa*, the "purse hand," and it is only one entry in a repertoire that researchers have counted in the hundreds. This is Guide 004 in The Love Italy Guide series.

Why Italians Gesture So Much

The reputation is earned, and there are real theories about why. One widely cited idea comes from University of Chicago psychologist Isabella Poggi, who has catalogued roughly 250 distinct Italian gestures with fixed meanings - a kind of parallel vocabulary rather than random hand-waving. A separate historical argument, popularized by the historian Andrea de Jorio in his 1832 study of Neapolitan gesture, links the density of

gesturing in southern Italy to centuries of crowded street life and successive waves of foreign rule, when a shared visual code could carry meaning across dialects and outsiders alike.

What matters for a visitor is that these signs are conventional, not theatrical. They are learned in childhood, used at conversational speed, and frequently replace whole spoken phrases. A hand can ask a question, register disbelief, warn a friend, or dismiss an idea - all without a word.

The Gestures You Will Actually See

A handful appear constantly. The *mano a borsa* - fingertips pinched and pointed up, hand bouncing - is the classic "che vuoi?," meaning "what do you want?" or "what on earth are you saying?" The chin flick, brushing the backs of the fingers forward from under the chin, most often signals "I couldn't care less" or "nothing," though its intensity varies by region. Tapping or twisting a fingertip into the cheek traditionally means something is *buono* - tasty or well done.

Two more are worth knowing. Pulling down the skin below one eye with a fingertip means "watch out" or "keep your eyes open." And the pinky and index finger extended into "horns," the *corna*, is a superstitious sign against bad luck when pointed downward - but an insult when jabbed toward a person, so it is best left alone.

How Meaning Shifts by Region and Context

Gestures are not a single national language. Naples and the south carry the richest inventory, and de Jorio's nineteenth-century work drew heavily on Neapolitan usage, some of which he traced back to imagery on ancient Greek and Roman artifacts. A gesture read one way in Palermo can carry a milder or sharper edge in Milan, and tone matters enormously: the same chin flick can be playful among friends or curt with a stranger.

A Short Etiquette for Visitors

The safest approach is to read gestures rather than perform them. Recognizing the *che vuoi?* hand or the "watch out" eye-pull will help you follow a conversation, but copying gestures you only half understand risks landing on an insult by accident - the jabbed *corna* being the obvious trap. If you do try one, keep to the unambiguous positives, like the cheek-screw for good food, and let volume and timing follow the person you are talking to.

Where the Tradition Comes From

De Jorio's *La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano* is often described as the first serious study of body language, written a century and a half before the field had a name. He argued that living Neapolitan gestures preserved a continuity with classical antiquity, using the streets around him as a guide to reading figures on ancient vases and frescoes. Whether or not every link holds, his work helped establish that gesture is a structured system worth studying - the foundation modern researchers like Poggi have since built on.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Italian gestures are just excitable flailing. In practice most carry fixed, agreed meanings and are used deliberately, often in place of speech rather than alongside emotion.

Myth: The pinched-fingers "purse hand" means "delicious." It is mainly a way to ask "what do you want?" or express incredulity. The "delicious" signal is the separate cheek-screw gesture.

Myth: These gestures are dying out with younger generations. They remain in everyday use across ages, and several have spread internationally through film, social media, and emoji.

Frequently Asked Questions

How many Italian hand gestures are there?

There is no official count, but researcher Isabella Poggi has documented around 250 gestures with stable, recognized meanings, which is the figure most often cited.

Is it rude to use these gestures myself?

Recognizing them is always fine. Performing them is riskier, because a few - especially the "horns" pointed at a person - are insults. Stick to clearly positive ones if you try any at all.

Do all Italians use the same gestures?

Not uniformly. The core signs are widely understood, but the south, and Naples in particular, has the deepest repertoire, and the force or nuance of a gesture can change from region to region.