

Eating Well in Piedmonte

Charles Scicolone (May 22, 2009)



Piedmont is known for its wine but many people do not know the food, which can be very different from what we think of as Italian food

The waitress looked at us strangely when Tom ordered the finanziera. “Do you know what it is?” she asked, “Are you sure that you want to eat that?” The dish is a specialty of the restaurant Osteria La Libera in Alba, but few foreigners who visit Piemonte order it. Finanziera is a rich stew and one of the classics of Piemontese cuisine. The ingredients include calf’s brains, sweetbreads, spleen, testicles, and cockscomb. Tom enjoyed every bit of it. My friend, wine writer Tom Maresca



and I were in Piedmont for the Alba Wines Exhibition. He has eaten it a number of times and his answer to both questions was "yes".

Piemontese food is not what most people think about when they think of Italian cooking. The Piemontese are meat eaters and they also eat a lot of game. Mushrooms, the rare and expensive white truffles, cow's milk cheeses and hearty pasta make up the larger part of the daily diet. This food is conducive to great wine, and in my opinion, the Langhe region of Piedmont, is the best place in all of Italy for food and wine pairings.

Tom is very much into the whole "nose to tail" concept of eating. On another occasion he ordered trippa di vitello, or stewed cow's stomach. When we are in Alba, I have two favorite restaurants, l'Arco and La Libera. Tom can find the foods he likes, but I



stick to more conventional Piemontese dishes such as carne cruda, raw veal that is hand chopped and flavored with extra virgin olive oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper. In the fall I like to have shaved fresh white truffles over the meat, a great combination. I love risotto and at Restaurant l'Arco I enjoyed it with asparagus tips and fava beans. Braised rabbit can be found in restaurants in the United States but rabbit here does not have the same flavor as those at restaurant l'Arco. Living in New York, I see pigeons all the time, but I only eat them at Osteria La Libera.

I have been going to l'Arco for over 20 years and it never disappoints. Osteria La Libera has been open for less than two years and I think I have found another favorite. They both have very good wine lists. At l'Arco we had the 2001 "Sarmassa" Barolo from G Brezza & Son and at La Libera the 1999 "Rabaja" Barbaresco from Castello di Verduno, both were excellent.



Tajarin (Tagliatelle) with meat sauce is served in almost all the restaurants in the area. I think I had it four times during the week I spent in Piemonte. The best was at Ristorante Villa Tiboldi in Canale. The restaurant is in a lovely hotel owned by the same people that own the Malvira winery. The pasta was cooked just right and the meat sauce could not have been better. It was a bit untraditional because the chef placed a few thinly sliced pieces of fried zucchini on the top. The crunchiness of the zucchini added to the texture and the taste.

I do not like to have my morning coffee in the hotel because I prefer to have it standing up at a *caffè*. After many disappointments (which were better than almost anything in this country), I found IL Salotto. Every morning I would have the same thing--cappuccino and a *brioche vuoto* (empty). The women behind the counter knew what I wanted before I walked in. One morning I decided to have a cherry brioche and it caused many comments by the staff. The Italians do not say espresso, they say *caffè*, and the *caffè* at IL Salotto is also excellent.



I am not a big dessert eater, but every time I had the chance I would go here for a cono at Caffè Brasilera. They have the best gelato in Alba. I always order the stracciatella, which is vanilla with chocolate chips. At Brasilera, it looks like a little bit of vanilla gelato covered with big pieces of chocolate. The gelato is wonderful and so is the chocolate, it gives new meaning to vanilla chocolate chip.

In the hills above Alba in the middle of a vineyard is the Locanda Del Pilone. We had stayed here few years ago and Michele wrote about it for an article in the Wine Spectator. The food is not traditional but our meal was excellent. I started with warm lardo served with mustard on bread made from black rice. Black rice! I was told by Marinella Chivero from Well Com Travel who was sitting with us that it was an aromatic rice called Venere (Venus). It was originally from China where at one time it was reserved for the emperors because of its nutritional value, rarity and aphrodisiac qualities. It was called the prohibited rice of Venere. Now it is available in the supermarkets of Alba.



The second course was foie gras in two different styles, served with jelly and sweet maize bread.

Lastly we had suckling pig with fennel, blood oranges and black olives. The hotel and restaurant is owned by the Boroli winery. We drank the Boroli Barolo 1997 and 1996. It was the perfect meal to end our trip.

After this great lunch I visited two more wineries and did not get back to Alba until 6:30. Just enough time to have another cono, caffè and una grappa.

I am now the Consulting Wine Director for Enoteca on Court and Marco Polo Restaurant in Brooklyn. Hope to see you there. Michele and I are leaving for the Amalfi Coast on Friday and I will return to the Enoteca on June 15.

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