

Unesco Hills
photo courtesy of Archivio Consorzio per la Tutela dell'Asti

Piedmont:

Italy's Table of Winter Gifts

By Marisa Finetti

Few places in Italy are more magical than Piedmont in the northwest corner of Italy. Its gentle rolling landscape often shrouded in fog, the region is so charming and mysterious, it's a sort of Brigadoon — mystical, unaffected by time and otherworldly.

It is home to some of the greatest wines of the world that by no coincidence complement the region's nuanced dishes. To characterize Piedmontese cuisine would be to describe its simplicity, harmoniously balanced with just the right amount of complexity and devotion to richness.

How this region came to develop food that is so different from other parts of Italy has much to do with its isolation from the rest of the country.

Cradled by the Swiss Alps to the north, the French Alps to the west and the Ligurian or Maritime Alps to the south, the Piedmontese table is distinctive. But its closest neighbor, France, has provided the greatest influence.

Exemplified by its employment of rich, weighty and mouth-coating ingredients from mayonnaise to béchamel sauces, the cuisine exudes luxury and refinement.

Here is a look at some of the mouth-watering ingredients and dishes — the gifts — for which Piedmont is known:



Hazelnuts

Cheese
Photo courtesy of Consorzio
Robiola di Roccaverano DOP

HAZELNUTS

Curiously crunchy with a slight essence of chocolate, the hazelnut from Piedmont is a memorable experience. The Nocciola Tonda Gentile Trilobata is a trilobed, noble round known for its textural intensity and delicate fragrance. It's no wonder this little thing of beauty is completely absorbed by high-end chocolate and confectionery makers of the world.

CHEESE

The cheeses of Piedmont are some of Italy's most luxurious. Castelmagno PDO, for example, is produced in only three small hamlets. The unique production process of the cow's milk curd and the aging in caves give Castelmagno an unmistakable taste and flavor. Many other fine varieties are produced locally, including Robiola di Roccaverano, Murazzano and Toma. They are made in such small amounts, commercialization is impossible, which means a trip to Piedmont is in store.



Grissini
Il Germoglio dei Sapori

White Truffle
Photo courtesy of Stefania Spadoni,
Archivio Centro Studi Tartufo



GRISSINI

A staple in restaurants and a favorite in many households, breadsticks first appeared around the 1300s in Turin. Nobles liked them because they aided digestion. Even Napoleon sent his troops to Turin to stock his personal stash. Grissini is traditionally made by hand and stretched to arm's length. Each baker typically applies a signature "mark" at the tip. The crispy perfection, flavor and character released upon a snap when bitten are addicting.

WHITE TRUFFLES OF ALBA

White truffles are the ultimate luxury commodity: rare, precious and getting more so all the time. They arrive only a few months of the year. When impossibly thin slices of fresh white truffles gracefully drift down onto the plate, it creates sheer pleasure. The aroma is uniquely pungent, transcendent and sublime. It conjures images of walking hand-in-hand on soft soil in a wooded forest on a drizzly day. Its rarity luminously elevates dishes such as fried eggs, carne cruda or tajarin. Stay faithful to Piedmont and pair with Barolo, Barbaresco and Barbera.





Tajarin
photo courtesy of Villa Prato

TAJARIN

Piedmont has fantastic eggs. And when it comes to pasta, the region boasts two main forms: tajarin (Piedmontese for tagliatelle) and agnolotti, Piedmont's ravioli — both of which are distinctively golden in color from the high egg content. Some recipes call for up to 40 egg yolks to create a two-pound dough. This profusion imparts a rich, silky texture with an affirmative bite one can't find anywhere else.

Vitello Tonnato
photo courtesy of Villa Prato

Risotto
photo courtesy of Cristiano Gramegna, Osteria Rosso di Sera



VITELLO TONNATO

The genius in Piedmontese cuisine is the ability to transform a few simple ingredients to create a dish of texture and flavor never previously imagined. This distinctiveness is nowhere more evident than in vitello tonnato. Adored by locals, sumptuous veal is sliced and dressed with a bright and citrusy mayonnaise-based sauce that is deliciously salty, thanks to the addition of tuna, capers and anchovies. This classic regional dish incorporates ingredients from the sea that are not indigenous to the area. But trade with the neighboring coastal region of Liguria has acquired olive oil, capers, citrus and preserved fish throughout the ages.

RISOTTO

Rich, creamy and comforting, risotto could easily be the main dish, but typically it is served as a primo (first course) in Piedmont. Perhaps the most well-known variety is Arborio from the town with the same name in the Po Valley. But there are a number of varieties to enjoy, such as Sant'Andrea, with its distinctive size grains and intrinsic characteristics to make a luxurious risotto. In the rice-growing region of Vercelli is Baraggia, an area which grows the first and only Italian rice to bear the PDO (protected designations of origin) label. The generous flow of water from the mountains nourishes the Baraggia rice varieties, creating the unique flavors, quality and organoleptic characteristics of Arborio, Baldo, Balilla, Carnaroli and Sant'Andrea, among others.





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photo courtesy of Archivio
Consorzio per la Tutela dell'Asti

Historically, the city of Turin was French because it was the seat of the House of Savoy, the French family who would eventually become the rulers of Italy. But to view Piedmont as an Italianate extension of France is not accurate. Piedmont may have been influenced, but not dictated to. Rather, it developed its own culture and cuisine, relying on the land and its resources.

It's hardly the place to grow olives for oil, so local dishes use butter and lard, which lend silky, rich textures to food. Specialties are cheeses, rice, hazelnuts, chocolate and truffles. Meats and root vegetables are generally cooked for long periods over low heat to allow the flavors to develop and impart a deliciously tasty and hearty character, perfect for getting through the cold winters.

Instead of pizzas and tomato-based pasta sauces found in other parts of Italy, starchy dishes here consist of risotto and polenta.

Piedmontese cuisine remains persistently seasonal and highly localized. Native foods and wines are

considered treasures. Now a worldwide movement, Slow Food was born in the village of Bra with the mission to elevate the appreciation of local food, cultures and traditions.

The commitment to producing and refining the region's specialty foods and ingredients is unparalleled, but not by any means glamorous. Shake the rough, calloused hand of a farmer, and meet a person who has worked in food production all his life — whether it's cheesemaking in the high elevations or growing rice in the fields of Vercelli.

Piedmontese cuisine is an irresistible feast of hearty foods made with passion. Start with half a dozen antipasti, followed by one or two courses invariably involving egg-rich pasta such as tajarin, followed by a meat course. To complete the experience, the food is best paired with the wines of the area, such as Barolo, Barbaresco, Barbera and Dolcetto.

To truly experience the immensely palatable wealth of the region is to taste it. ◇

patron for a cause



DR. TRUDY LARSON | *for organ, eye and tissue donations*

On the governing board for Nevada Donor Network, Dr. Trudy Larson has been an infectious disease specialist for more than three decades. Her work with the Organ and Tissue Donor Program at the University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine provides a statewide perspective of donation.

A recent medical breakthrough allows people with Hepatitis C who die from a drug overdose to be donors, which reduces the waiting list, Larson says. After receiving an organ from someone with Hepatitis C and taking medication for 12 weeks, recipients are cured and have a functioning kidney, liver or heart, Larson says.

Tissue donations (eyes, tendons, bone and skin) are used in orthopedic surgery, heart-valve replacements and skin transplants for burn victims.

"Donation is noble," Larson said. "Every board meeting at the Nevada Donor Network starts with a donor family or recipient sharing their story of how loss turned into hope, which reminds us of our mission."

Joe Ferreira, president and CEO of the Nevada Donor Network, has elevated the bar by investing in more training and diversifying services, resulting in a culture of excellence, Larson says. The organization is a world leader in the number of lives saved per capita served.

"Our goal is to increase the number and type of transplants by increasing donation and the specialized doctors and staff needed for transplantation," Larson said. "The public's support is vital and appreciated."

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