

# Eating Italian in small pieces and places

At the Salone del Gusto, history and geography merge on the table. DONALD PAUL takes a taste trip through Turin

**G**IANCARLO Russo fiddles with his apron strings while Mapi, an elegant young publicist, has an animated conversation on her cellphone, rolling her eyes every time she has to listen to the person at the other end.

Whatever they're saying is not making her happy.

It is 11am on the first day of the Salone del Gusto, the Festival of Taste, in Turin, Italy. In 30 minutes Giancarlo is taking a group of journalists on a culinary tour of Crotona, an area in the southern province of Calabria, in an event billed as "tastes from the land of Pythagoras".

The Greek-born mathematician would have had something to say about the food: the philosophical society he founded in Crotona and its inner circle of followers, known as the matematikoi, were sworn vegetarians. We were about

to eat swine, or so we hoped.

The publicist turns to her colleague, Cocchi Ballaira, and they confer in rapid Italian.

Cocchi works for Adfarmandchicas, a company handling the series of tasting events at the Salone del Gusto on behalf of the Leader+ Programme, a community project run by the Italian ministry of farming, food and forestry policies.

The Leader+ project "promotes the integrated, organic and sustainable development of Europe's rural and marginal areas", and is the driving force behind Italy's National Network for Rural Development that has created 132 local action groups.

The food from today's highlighted local action group (Crotona) is, it seems, stuck in a traffic accident. Giancarlo blinks behind his large-rimmed glasses and strokes his beard. His food consultancy company advises producers



**CHEWING THE FAT:** Cholesterol-enriched slabs of lardo, cured pork back fat, a delicacy of the Crotona region of Italy. Picture: DONALD PAUL

seeking export markets and he lectures on food at the university in Turin and does tasting workshops.

As we are talking, a man arrives with a great leg of cured pork over his shoulder. He places it on a table, pulls an enormous carving knife from his waistband and cleanly slices off a large chunk.

Giancarlo urges people to take their seats and, while the butcher slices thin strips of prosciutto, the attendants serve the first wine: a Cirò Riserva Duca San Felice 2003. Cirò is a small town in Calabria that has, says Giancarlo, "3 000 years of winemaking history". The wine, from an autochthonous varietal, Gaglioppo, with lots of tannins and strong spices, has strong berry flavours and a hint of iron.

We are then served the prosciutto. Made from black pigs and matured for up to 18 months, beneath the thick layer of fat is a full-flavoured, but clean, salty meat. I see little hope of a matematikoi comeback.

We move on to the salumi di

maiale nero di Calabrese, a strong, fatty salami flavoured with herbs from the area.

It is when we get to the capicollo, a cured sausage, that Giancarlo loses his slightly laconic poise. The dark meat and presence of fat yield a sublime taste. "Chew this slowly," he says, his eyes closed. "You can taste the sunshine on the land." He's right.

While we savour the moment, he has thin slices of lardo, cured pork back fat, sent around. It's salty, melt-in-your-mouth rude but sublime.

We are now drinking the Librandi Magno Megonio 2004, a rounder, slightly softer wine with berry on the nose and a peppery aftertaste. The name, Magno Megonio, is taken from the Roman centurion that grew vines in this region more than 2 000 years ago, and was the first to leave a written record on the quality of the local wines. Librandi has stayed true to the local varietal, magliocco, which was once the most important grape in the region.

We then eat a plate of sardella, a traditional dish of baby sardines, fennel, herbs and olive oil, and instantly, we are transported to the rocky hillsides above the Ionian sea. Alongside the sardella is a saucer of Alto Crotonese extra virgin olive oil, a strong, peppery oil that makes you forget yourself: you end up sucking your fingers and dreaming of olive groves and sunshine, an amuse bouche away from drooling.

Tour director Giancarlo has other plans. We will cross the sea to Sardinia, and sample the Fiore Sardo, a traditional pecorino cheese; then head north to try an Alpe Monsciera and Alpe Ciamporino from Ossola, a narrow valley high in the Alps, near the Swiss border; and, staying in the north, finish within the Vall d'Aosta for some Toma di Gressoney cheese, also in Piedmont. Served with each will be a honey from the region, and some typical bread.

The Fiore Sardo is made from sheep's milk curdled with lamb or

kid rennet. It is an uncooked, hard cheese made using ancient techniques. The moulds give the cheese its distinctive "donkey back" shape, and each weighs about 3kg-4kg. The moulds are soaked in brine, then smoked and left to ripen in cool cellars. The flavour explodes in your mouth.

We eat this with carasau bread, corn-flour bread that is cooked twice: once after rising; then it is sliced and baked again. Over this we spread a layer of orgosolo honey. "This is called a patriotic honey," says Giancarlo. "The flower the bees feed on is the colour of the Italian flag; a bright red flower and dark green leaves. And because of its strong flavour." We drink a typical Sardinian red, Cannonau: spicy and high in alcohol.

*"The dark meat and presence of fat yielded a sublime taste. Chew this slowly," he says, his eyes closed. "You can taste the sunshine on the land"*

From there, we move north to the Ossola Valley. Here, we taste two cheeses from two different mountains on either side of the same valley. "These are the same types of cheese," says our tour guide, "but from different cows, eating different grasses. They are milked once a day and the milk is never mixed." And yes, the two cheeses are deliciously different.

Taken with a dark and dense rye bread and a rhododendron honey, life as a cowherd seems suddenly very appealing. Giancarlo offers a famous local red, Prunent, which has been likened to Nebbiolo with hints of pomegranate and spice.

Staying in the north, we move on to sample the Toma di Gressoney, made from the milk of cows that graze in the high mountains.

This is a perfect example of the work the Slow Food Movement does. Since medieval times, the area has been home to the Walsers, cowherds who originated from Valais. Until recently, most of their milk was used for processed cheese, but they now receive support for their traditional cheese making. It is a round compact cheese, and varies in colour from white to ochre, depending on the maturation. It can be eaten fresh or after a few months of maturation and ages well, although the taste will become more pungent.

But before we eat the cheese, Giancarlo pours a glass of local 2005 Pinot Gris. "The terroir is distinctive. The vines are planted high in the mountains and the temperature day and night is very constant." The colour has lots of green, and the nose a full, sweet fragrance. "This wine's aroma truly arouses the cheese," Giancarlo says, and invites us to inhale the bouquet and put a piece of di Gressoney in our mouth. The Alps never seemed closer.

While eating this cheese Giancarlo says: "You can taste the animal." And that's what summed up the tastes of this culinary journey.

As Le Quartier Français chef Margot Janse says when I ask what captivated her most about the Salone del Gusto: "The distinctive flavours of every item on the plate. The cheese, the honey, the bread; and when taken together, there again was this extraordinary depth of flavour." And thus ended day one of the tour. Tomorrow we plan to visit Sicily. Rome beckons.

## GETTING IT RIGHT:

IN LAST week's issue, an editing error incorrectly attributed the comment of a Slow Food Movement member of being disappointed with what he viewed as the "bowing down to corporate sponsors" which he felt was subverting the movement, to Carlo Petrini.



**MILK FROM THE MOUNTAINS:** Toma di Gressoney cheese, served with regional bread, honey, wine and Alps. Picture: DONALD PAUL

## FOOD NEWS

# Goldcrest Young Chef of the Year

**T**WELVE young chefs competed for the coveted prize in the recent Goldcrest Young Chef of the Year competition – an all-expenses paid working holiday in Dubai.

In what was described as the narrowest of margins by Jeff Schueremans, local competitions director at the SA Chefs Association, Henk Bezuidenhout of Randburg-based HTA School of Culinary Art scooped the grand prize.

This is the menu that won

Henk his week in Dubai, where he will gain international experience at a top establishment:

### STARTER

Creamed Escargot Ravioli with Saffron Aioli  
Crab Tortellini, infused with Tarragon and enriched with Coconut  
Steamed Pink Salmon Dim Sum with Mango and Jalapeno Confit

### MAIN

Herb Crusted Lamb Cutlets with Mixed Bean Cassoulet, Pea and Mint Pancakes and Red Pimento Oil

### DESSERT

Burned Mandarin Orange Cheesecake with Honey Glazed Baby Pear and Spiced Walnuts

### BURNED MANDARIN ORANGE CHEESECAKE

1 tin Goldcrest baby pears  
2 tbsp Goldcrest raspberry jam  
2 tbsp Goldcrest canned strawberries  
1 tin Goldcrest Mandarin orange segments  
2 tbsp Goldcrest easy-squeeze honey  
3 tsp gelatine  
200ml cream  
230ml smooth cottage cheese, full cream  
1 tin condensed milk  
300ml orange juice  
150ml lemon juice  
1 tbsp butter  
Packet walnuts  
Pinch of paprika  
Pinch of cajun spice

### CHEESECAKE

Boil orange segments and orange juice, reducing to thick syrup. Add dissolved gelatine and remove from heat.

Don't cool completely. Fold lemon juice into condensed milk until thickened.

Whip cream into a stiff peak, and then fold together with cottage cheese into the condensed milk mixture.

### HONEY GLAZED PEAR AND NUTS

Strain pears and dry slightly with kitchen towel.

Melt butter and fry pears until caramelised, remove from heat and glaze with honey while still warm.

Remove pears and add walnuts, along with spices to the caramelised honey.



### COULIS

Soften jam and strawberries in a saucepan with some strawberry syrup. Purée mixture and push through sieve.

Keep warm for serving.

Serve slices of cheesecake with one honey glazed pear per person, decorating with caramelised walnuts and coulis.

Serves four.

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