

Made in Italy

Food and stories



Giorgio Locatelli

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Made in Italy: Food and Stories

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Locatelli G.

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In this exquisitely designed and photographed volume, Britain's favourite Italian chef brings forth the work of a lifetime: combining old Locatelli family stories and recipes with the contemporary must-have dishes from his celebrated London restaurants. 'I am an Italian chef who has cooked in Paris and come of age in London,' says Giorgio Locatelli. 'Innovative, imaginative food is what people expect from me, but everything I do has its roots in classical, regional Italian cooking.' This is the book that fans of Locatelli have been waiting for ever since he first made his name at Zafferano. The recent opening of Locanda Locatelli, widely regarded as one of the most exciting restaurants in London, has fuelled interest in this master chef. Locatelli lights up Locanda with his big, welcoming personality, seamlessly marrying style with an all-Italian mission simply to bring people together at the table to share food, relax and enjoy good company and conversation. In the same way, his delight in food shines through on every page of this exciting book. Whether he is reminiscing about the dishes of his native Lombardy, suggesting a starter combining the simplest and freshest ingredients, or explaining how to make the ultimate risotto, Locatelli transports the reader into his own kitchen to savour the real tastes of Italy. Full of the insight and historical detail you might expect from a food writer, combined with the hands-on expertise of a top chef, peppered with evocative stories, and funny and often outspoken observations on the state of food today, this is the contemporary Italian food bible, from the acknowledged master of modern Italian cooking.

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**Made In Italy
Food & Stories
Giorgio Locatelli
with Sheila Keating
Photographs by
Dan Lepard**

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To Plaxy

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La Convivialità

I wanted to call this book *Made of Italy*, because that is what I am – but I could as easily have called it *La Convivialità* – because that is the word I use most to explain the way Italians feel about food. For us the sign of welcome is to feed people. At the heart of all cooking, whether you are rich or poor, is the spirit of conviviality, the pleasure that comes from sharing a meal with others. And there is no enjoyment of food, without quality.

The way I think about food is entirely in tune with the Slow Food movement, started in Italy back in 1986 by Carlo Petrini in defiance of the opening of a McDonalds outlet in the Piazza di Spagna in Roma. Now a world wide force, Slow Food champions local, traditional produce with real flavour, made by caring people with skill and wisdom, which is celebrated every two years – with wonderful conviviality – at the Salone del Gusto, the famous food fair in Torino.

In the UK it is easy to blame supermarkets for clocking up air miles, for persuading us that we want fruit and vegetables that look perfect, but often have little flavour; for luring us on to diets of things that are salty, fatty, sugary and easy to eat; for packaging everything into convenient parcels so that we almost forget where our food comes from; and conditioning us to think that as long as our food is cheap, we are satisfied. But *we* have responsibilities too, and we have the power to change things. Of course I understand when you have kids you want to go to the supermarket, not traipse for miles trying to find a good butcher and fishmonger and green-grocer, and I'm not sitting here in my restaurant saying, you must do this and that, only remember that every time you pick up food in a supermarket, you are making a choice that has consequences. Where do you want to invest your money? In the profits of a supermarket, or in a farm rearing fantastic old breeds of pigs, or a small dairy making beautiful cheese?

You will see the letters DOP (PDO in the UK) and IGP (PGI in the UK) throughout the book. DOP represents Denominazione di Origine Protetta or Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), and it appears alongside the specific name of a product such as Parmigiano Reggiano or prosciutto di Parma. What it tells you is that in order to earn the stamp of the DOP and be allowed to use this name, the food must be produced in a designated area, using particular methods. IGP represents Indicazione Geografica Protetta, or Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), which is similar, but states that at least one stage of production must occur in the traditional region, and doesn't place as much emphasis on the method of production. Whenever you buy Italian produce, look out for these symbols.

Salt should ideally be natural sea salt, and pepper freshly ground and black. Spend a little extra on good extra virgin olive oil and vinegar, and it will repay you a thousand times. And whenever possible buy whole chickens, and meat and fish on the bone, not portioned and wrapped in plastic.

All recipes serve 4, unless otherwise stated

‘You’ll never be a chef, Locatelli!’

‘Pass the prawns...the prawns...where are they...are they ready!’ I had been helping with the cooking in my uncle’s restaurant since I was five years old, but now, at sixteen, and a few months into my first real job, I used to get picked on all the time by the head chef. Now he wanted the prawns and they weren’t ready. The water in the pan was almost boiling. It needed to be boiling, before I put in the prawns, but I panicked and put them in anyway. He saw it and shouted at me, ‘You will never be a chef, Locatelli. You are an idiot,’ and he sent me to clean the French beans.

I couldn’t forget those words: ‘You will never be a chef.’ By the end of the day, I wanted to cry like a baby. I went home and my grandmother was waiting. ‘What does he know?’ she said. ‘Who is he?’ ‘He is The Chef!’ I told her. I would have run away, but as always my grandmother put everything into perspective, and she told me I had to go back and show him. So I went back. And I did show him.

Food, love and life...





My first feelings for cooking came from my grandmother, Vincenzina. But my first understanding of the relationship between food, sex, wine and the excitement of life came together for me very early on, when I was growing up in the village of Corgeno on the shores of Lake Comabbio in Lombardia in the North of Italy – long before I was suspended from cooking school for kissing girls on the college steps.

My uncle Alfio and my auntie Louisa, with the help of my granddad, built our hotel and restaurant, La Cinzianella – named after my cousin Cinzia – on the shores of the lake, on the edge of the village of Corgeno in 1963.

There were eight founding families in the village. The Caletti family, on my mother's side, was one of them; and on my grandmother's side, the Tamborini family, along with the Gnocchi family, who are our cousins, and who have a pastry shop in Gallarate, near Milano, in the hinterland, before the scenery changes from city to green and beautiful space, and where the speciality is gorgeous soft amaretti biscuits.

The shop gave me my first taste of an industrial kitchen. I used to love going in there as a kid, because the ovens were so big you could walk into them. In the season running up to Christmas, over and above the other confectionery, they would make around 10,000 panettone (our Italian Christmas cake). It was fascinating to watch the people take the panettone from the ovens, and then, while they were still warm, hang them upside down in rows on big ladders in the finishing room, so that the

dough could stretch and take on that characteristic light, airy texture. Years later, when I first started in the kitchens at the Savoy, I felt at home immediately, because I recognized that same sense of busy, busy people, working away in total concentration.

Of course, everyone in Corgeno seems to be some sort of cousin, though none of us can remember exactly how we are related. Six generations of our families are buried in the village graveyard, and the names are etched many times into the war memorial outside the church with the two Roman towers, above the makeshift football pitch where we kids played every day after we had (or hadn't) done our homework.

Life in the North of Italy is very different from the way it is in the pretty Italy of the South – the idyllic Italy, still a little wild, that you always see in movies. The South fulfils the Mediterranean expectation, whereas the North is the real heart of Europe. Historically we have been under many influences: Spanish, French, Austrian... at home we are only around 20 kilometres from Switzerland, and Milano is the most cosmopolitan city in Italy. In the North I don't know anyone who hasn't got a job and everyone comes to the North to find work – the reverse of the way it is in England.

The industrial North of Ferrari and Alessi can be more stark; but somehow I think it has a tougher, more impressive and real kind of beauty than the regions that the English love so much, like Toscano and Umbria. You might not think they are very far down the boot of Italy, but where I come from anything below Bologna is south. In the North, we are famous for designing and making things, things that work properly. Northern Italians always tell jokes against southern Italians, and vice versa. We like to say that, in Roma, if you have to dig a hole in the road it will take eight months; in the North everything will be fixed and running like clockwork in a day. And while most of Italy used to stop for a big break at lunchtime – especially in the South, where it was too hot to work – in Milano and around Lombardia it would be one hour only. The factory whistles would go at 12 noon – the signal for the wives and mothers at home to put in the pasta – and then the road would be full of bicycles and scooters and motorbikes, as everyone shot home to eat and then straight back to work.

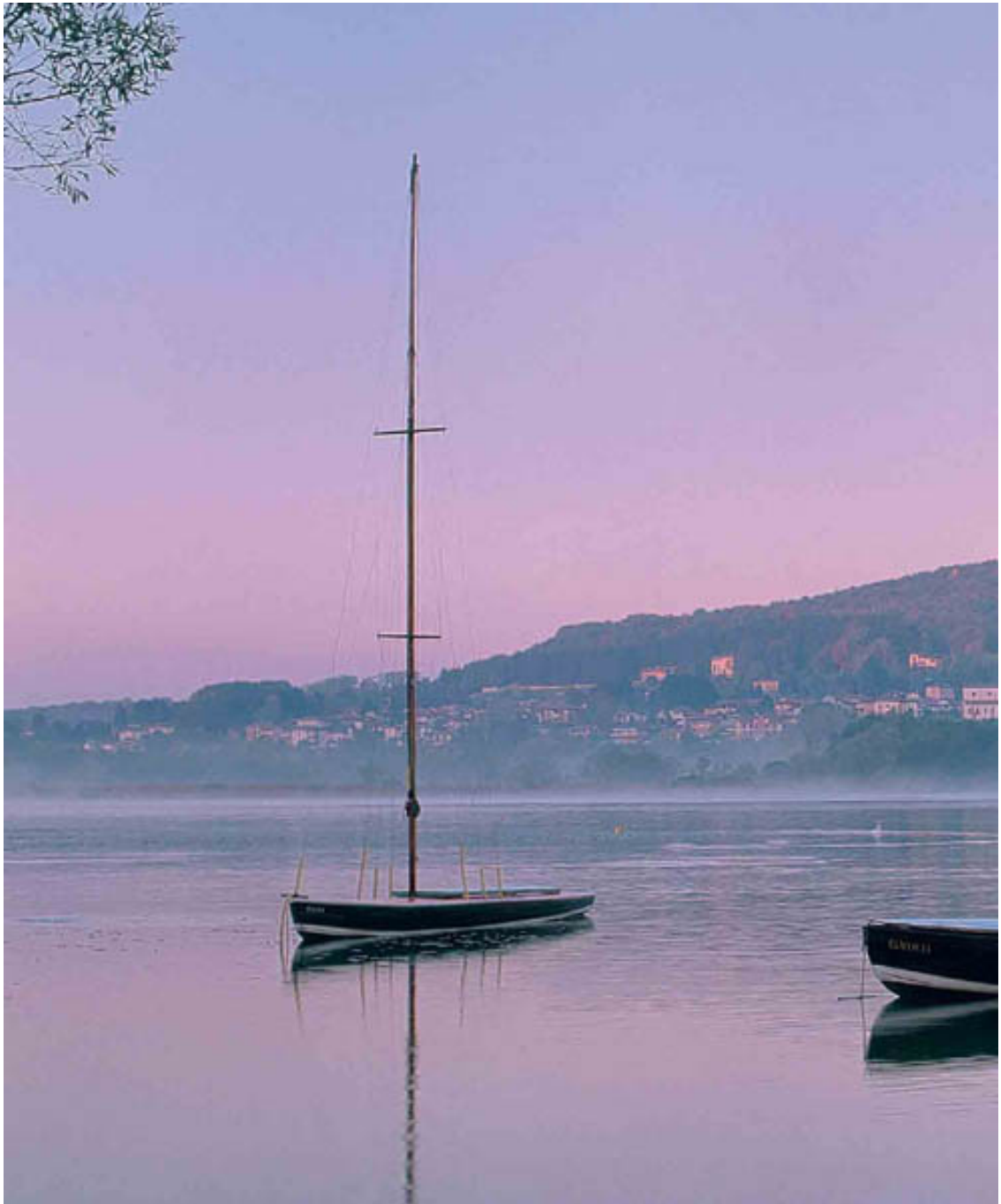
In the South, they are used to delicate foods like mozzarella and tomatoes and seafood. In the North, we are proud of our Parmigiano Reggiano and prosciutto di Parma and big warming dishes like polenta and risotto. And if we haven't used our food to promote our area around the world as strongly as other regions, it is not because it is less important to us, but that we haven't needed to, because we are known for other things.

Corgeno is a place steeped in history, firstly because of its twin Roman towers and more recently because of its pocket resistance to fascism. On one of the old walls you can see the faded words of one of Mussolini's slogans that still makes me angry every time I see it, with its call to the youth of Italy to put down their picks and shovels and take up arms. There are many stories in our village of the local men of the resistance who used to hide in the woods where the women would bring them food. One of them, my father's brother, Nino, was shot on one of his trips, trying to help forty Jewish people to escape over the border into Switzerland.

Below the village is La Cinzianella, only a few steps to the edge of the lake, which I love, especially in autumn, my favourite time of year. Almost tragic isn't it, autumn? But so beautiful. Early in the morning, you can't see the lake because it is hiding in a mauve mist, but when it rises the sky is bright blue and the trees around the lake, with their red and gold leaves, stand out clearly against it. And it is so quiet: all you can hear are the birds calling and scudding over the water – and across the lake the faint buzz of motorbikes going at a hundred miles an hour across the *superstrada*, the straight towards Mercallo, and into the turn, as if they were on a race track.

We are only forty-five minutes drive from the centre of Milano, and right next to the bigger and more famous Lago Maggiore, so now a lot of people from the city come for weekends; they have bought houses, and the village has grown. But when I was growing up, there were only about 2,000 people and everyone knew everyone else: who was just born, who died; it was all-important to our lives.

I remember one of the first new families to move into Corgeno, from Sicilia – the wife worked at la Cinzianella, and we nicknamed one of the kids







Mandarino after the oranges that came from Sicilia. They spoke a dialect that sounded foreign to us, and the father was loud and dramatic when he talked; tragic, comical...so different from my father, who never raised his voice.

Almost everything we ate and drank was produced locally. We even picked up the milk every evening from the window of the house of Napoleone, who kept a few cows. Each family had their own bottles and he would fill them up and leave them for us to collect – in winter outside the window, in summer in the courtyard under a fountain. Later, when I was a young boy and I was working in restaurants abroad, when I came home for the holidays, people would always open their windows to lean out and say hello. They still do. Whenever we go to Corgeno, my wife Plaxy complains that it takes an hour to walk through the village, because someone will always shout, ‘Hey, Giorgio’ – and it always seems to be an ex-girlfriend.

I remember coming back home after one summer when I was a teenager. I stopped in at the tobacconist to buy cigarettes, and by the time I got to our house, my grandmother already knew that I had changed from Camel to Marlboro. That is how small our village was.

My auntie, uncle and my father and mother all worked in the hotel and my uncle ran the restaurant where I worked, too, as soon I was big enough. Later we had a Michelin star, but then we just served good, honest Italian food and on Saturdays we did banqueting and wedding receptions in a big beautiful room at the top of the hotel, looking out over the lake. We used to feed around 180 people and when we were at our busiest, we would make 20 kilos of dough for the gnocchi and everyone, from the waiters to the women who did the rooms, would come into the kitchen to help shape them. In summer, our guests could sit out on the terrace under big umbrellas. If it was raining they gathered inside around a big table in the corridor, and no one ever complained.

There are ten rooms in La Cinzianella, and we would send food to the rooms, too. Every Sunday a well-known gentleman from the village, Luciano, would come to the hotel in his Mercedes, with a woman called Rosetta. Everyone knew that his wife had been ill for a long time and that Rosetta was his mistress. So on Sundays his room would be ready for him from about two o’clock, and by six, six-thirty, he would call us and order a bottle of champagne. I remember my mother would put it on a tray and, of course, somebody had to take it up – all of us young boys wanted to do it, because we wanted to catch a glimpse of Rosetta.

I still remember her – warm and round and womanly, like my auntie Maria Luisa, who was beautiful too, the nearest thing to royalty. Maria Luisa was the only one who had any power over me when I was wayward, and could tell me off without ever losing her temper, unlike my mother, who is quite a nervous woman. When my grandfather died, we sat down for our first meal all together without him, and we all expected that my father would take his place at the head of the table, but Maria Luisa came in and sat down in the place of my granddad and she has been there ever since.

My auntie and Rosetta – for me they represented sexuality, but all bound up with good food and wine and generosity, because by seven-thirty, showered and beautifully dressed, Rosetta and her gentleman friend would come down to eat dinner and we would welcome them warmly; we were part of their lives, and they were part of ours. There was a complicity between restaurateur and guest, which is one of the things I have tried to create in my own restaurant.

Even in the heart of London, I feel we have a special bond with our customers. Eating is not just about fuelling up to get through the day; it is about conviviality, friendship and celebration. I like the fact that people come to us again and again for an anniversary, or a birthday. I want them to bring their kids, so I can take them into the kitchen, and they can help prepare the dessert for their mums and dads. I like to feel that I can come and sit down and chat with them in between cooking; and if I see them on the street one morning, I can invite them into the restaurant for coffee. Sometimes people who have eaten at Locanda, and before that at Zafferano, whom we have known for many years, come to see us after a husband or wife has died, or they have split up, because in a strange, poignant way, we have become part of their lives. For my wife, Plaxy, and for me that is so special; because this is *our* restaurant, an extension of our family; and everything that happens in it is personal to us. I know how important it is to have that intimacy, because the memories of our relationship with the local gentleman and Rosetta at La Cinzianella have stayed with me all my life.



Antipasti Starters



Pellegrino Artusi



‘It is true that man does not live by bread alone; he must eat something with it.’

Italians are very impatient people. We can’t sit for more than a minute in traffic and we hate to wait for our food. That is why we invented antipasti, which literally means ‘before the meal [*pasto*]’. When I first came to England, I thought it so strange to see people at parties and weddings standing about having drinks before they ate. Italians just want to get around the table as soon as possible, so the bread can arrive. Not just bread – we also want salami, prosciutto, maybe some marinated artichokes, some olives... We want to enjoy a glass of wine, to talk and argue, because everything we do in a day is a small drama and everyone has an opinion on it – but we need to eat while we are discussing it. Once the antipasti are on the table, that is the signal to relax, get into the mood and interact, because you have to pass the plates and everyone is saying, ‘Oh what is this?’ and, ‘Can I have some of that?’ It is all about conviviality and sharing and generosity.

A few miles from my home in Corgeno, in Lombardia, on the way to nowhere, is the village of Cuirone, with its pale, yellow-washed houses; a place that has hardly changed since I was a child. In the middle of the village is the *Societa Mutuo Soccorso*, the cooperative shop and restaurant with a bakery attached, where they make fantastic chestnut and pumpkin bread, as well as the big *pane bianchi*, which is the everyday bread. Inside the bakery, they have a basket that is full of drawstring bags, some gingham, some flowery. Each family makes their own bag, and the bakers know which bread they have, so in the morning when the loaves come out of the oven, the bags get filled up and delivered by scooter.

At one time in our region of Italy, most of the villages had a *cooperativa*, run by the locals, where everyone could bring their produce to sell and where you could get a simple lunch for not much money. Everything you ate would be produced locally. You have to remember that Italy has only been a united country for not much more than a hundred years. Before that it was made up of different kingdoms, dukedoms, republics etc., each influenced by different neighbours and invading armies throughout its history.

Also in Italy you have a massive geographical change from mountains to coastlines, from the colder North with its plains full of cows giving beef, and milk for cheese, to the hot South, on the same parallel as Africa, where they grow a profusion of lemons, tomatoes, capers and peppers. So in every region, town, and village, they have their own particular ingredients and style of cooking, which of course they will insist is absolutely the right way – and that what everyone else does is wrong.

In Corgeno, the *cooperativa* was next to my uncle’s restaurant, La Cinzianella, overlooking the lake, and when you turned twenty years old, you were asked to run it for the summer (the year my friends and I took charge we had a fantastic time). But now the space is rented out as a café and restaurant. In Cuirone, though, the *cooperativa* is still thriving, and sometimes, especially when I come home to visit, my Mum and Dad, and my aunts, uncles and cousins all meet up there for lunch at the weekend. Lunch is at 12.30, and 12.30 is what they mean, so you don’t dare be late.



It's a very simple place: a large room with a long bar down one side and wooden tables and chairs where the farmers and the old men of the village drink red wine and play cards. But the

moment you sit down, big baskets of bread from the bakery arrive with bottles of local wine, and then the plates of antipasti: salami, prosciutto, lardo, carpaccio, local cheeses, artichokes, porcini. As one plate is taken away, more arrive, and so it goes on and on. Then, just when my wife Plaxy, especially, is thinking that there can't be any more food, out comes a pasta dish – maybe a baked lasagne – and then a fruit dessert.

The antipasti are based around simple produce, just like in people's homes and most small restaurants. The members of the *cooperativa* bring whatever they have that is fresh that day, along with ingredients such as artichokes and mushrooms, prepared when they were in season, then preserved in big jars under vinegar or oil, or *salamoia* (brine). In Italy, things are done differently from in the UK, especially London, where you buy your food, eat it, and then buy some more. Most people in Italy still behave like they did in the old days, when you would always have a store cupboard full of dried or preserved foods because you never knew when there would be a war or some other disaster.

In smarter restaurants, the kitchen would have the chance to show off a little more with the antipasti. In my uncle's kitchen at La Cinzianella we really worked at our antipasti, bringing out some fantastic flavours, because we knew that this prelude to the meal said a lot about what you were trying to achieve with your food, and about the dishes that would follow. The slicing machine was right in the middle of the big dining room, so everyone could see the cured meats being freshly cut, and we would prepare seafood salads and roast vegetables. Imagine how I reacted the first time I went to a French restaurant and they sent out some canapés before the meal – those tiny, bite-sized things. I was shocked. I thought, 'If this is what the rest of the food is going to be like, forget it!' Italians don't like to fiddle about with fancy morsels, they just want to welcome people by sharing what they have, however simple, in abundance. An Italian's role in life is to feed people. A lot. We can't help it.



The traditional Italian meal





In Italy the concept of the ‘starter’ – individually plated dishes that you eat by yourself, just *you* – is quite a modern thing. Only in the last twenty years or so have restaurants started putting them on the menu. Traditionally, after the antipasti the real ‘starter’ was the pasta course, or first plate (*i primi piatti*). Then came the second plate (*i secondi piatti*), which would be meat or fish, and, to finish, fruit or a dessert (*i dolci*).

When I look at the books I have of old regional recipes, no mention is made of ‘starters’ as we think of them today. One of the books I love most is *La Scienza in Cucina e l’Arte di Mangiar Bene* (Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well) by Pellegrino Artusi. All Italian cooks know about Artusi – he was a great gourmet and one of the first writers to gather together recipes from all over Italy. He published the book himself back in 1891, in the days when Italian food was considered a bit vulgar in ‘smart’ society because the food of the royal courts was French.

Artusi spent twenty years travelling around Italy and his knowledge of regional produce and cooking was remarkable. His stories are full of beautiful descriptions and witty comments, sometimes using old Italian words that I have to look up. I keep his book in my office in the kitchen at Locanda to research ingredients and old recipes. But even Artusi has only a short section on ‘appetisers’, which is really just an acknowledgement of the moment before the meal when you show off your capacity to bring out food of a high quality. (Interestingly, he says that in Toscana they did things differently from other regions and served these ‘delicious trifles’ *after* the pasta, not before.) Artusi talks about

various cured meats, caviar and *mosciame* (salted and air-dried tuna), but the only ‘recipes’ he gives for appetisers are a selection of crostini: fried bread topped with ingredients such as capers, chicken livers and sage, or woodcock and anchovies.

Traditionally, the kind of antipasti you ate was determined by where you lived. Around the coast there would obviously be more seafood, while inland there were cured meats. Every region would have different breads to serve with the antipasti: light, airy breads in the North, white unsalted bread in Toscana and enormous country loaves made with harder flour in the South – fantastic for bruschetta, which these days has become rather elevated in restaurants, but is really just chargrilled stale bread with a bit of garlic and tomato rubbed over it and some oil drizzled on top.

Even now, food in Italy is very regional, but after the Second World War, when everything became more abundant and people began to travel more, some chefs started to be a little inventive and borrow ideas for their antipasti from other regions, and from the street food you see cooked in cities such as Napoli by vendors with gas burners on trolleys: *arancini* (rice balls), *crocchette* (mashed potato croquettes), *panzerotti* (little pasties filled with meat, cheese, tomatoes or anchovies, then deep-fried), *mozzarella in carrozza* (mozzarella ‘in a carriage’ – deep-fried between slices of bread), and *frittelle* (fritters filled with artichokes, mushrooms or prawns).





Italian food today

Nowadays in Italy – in the cities at least – like everywhere else in the world, the way people want to eat is changing, though perhaps a little more slowly than everywhere else. Not everyone wants a meal of several courses any more. They want to be more relaxed, so you can order just a bowl of pasta and nobody thinks anything of it. And there are now city bars serving only antipasti, where you make yourself up a plate of whatever you want, and that's all you have. Then there are the newer, smarter restaurants, which try really hard to make their starters more imaginative than a plate of carpaccio or an *insalata caprese* (tomatoes and mozzarella).

As for me, I am an Italian chef who has cooked in Paris and come of age in London, and inventive starters are what people expect from me. I might have in the kitchen a salami that is so beautiful it makes you cry, but I can't just slice it and put it out with some artichokes and bread. I have to present it in a more sophisticated way. We must include such starters in the restaurant, but we can't lose the pasta course, so the modern Italian menu usually has four sections: starters, pasta, main courses and dessert, which I know can seem daunting. Sometimes customers say, 'What should I do? Do I have to have a starter, then pasta and a main course after that? Or can I have just pasta and a dessert?' Of course, you can do what you like; we just try to give a selection of everything an Italian would want to be offered, so you can eat as few or as many courses as you want.

However sophisticated our menu may be at Locanda, it always has its roots in classic regional Italian cooking. Sure, some of our favourite starters have come about, like all good dishes, from getting excited about a particular ingredient that comes into the kitchen, but many of them are simply our interpretation of the traditional elements of the *antipasti misti* – the artichokes, porcini and cured meats with which I and most of my kitchen staff have grown up. We look at them, rethink them and work at representing them in more imaginative or surprising ways.

The key is always to concentrate on just a few flavours. I think it is terrible to eat out in a restaurant and not remember afterwards what you had because there were too many tastes happening at once on your plate. It is better to buy primary ingredients that have their own fantastic flavour and then you have to do less with them.

One of the great things that has happened since I came to this country is the revolution in the quality of ingredients. When the first Italian immigrants came to the UK and set up their restaurants, they brought what they could over from Italy and created a limited Italian kitchen, making Anglo-Italian dishes that catered for British tastes. Then when people began to be more interested in the genuine food of Italy, and were prepared to pay for real Parmigiano Reggiano and prosciutto di Parma and mozzarella di bufala, the best quality food began to be imported, and producers in this country began to think, 'We can do this, too.' So now there is a wonderful mix of high quality Italian and British produce that you can use in your antipasti.

Reinterpreting the classics

Very little of the traditional *antipasti misti* involves hot food – just a few deep-fried dishes, such as courgette flowers or squid, or the *panzerotti* and *frittelle* I mentioned earlier. Personally, I don't like to eat too many fried foods at the start of a meal. So, instead, for our hot starters at the restaurant we look to the kind of main dishes that every Italian knows – great classics with brilliant flavours, such as sardines baked in breadcrumbs, or pig's trotters – then we refine them and scale them down into starters. We play a bit of a game with the presentation, or make them easier for people to eat in a restaurant environment. Sometimes, when I see some of our famous customers thoroughly enjoying a starter of *gnocchi fritti* with *culatello*, it makes me smile to see something that you would find in any antipasti bar in Italy being celebrated in such a way, when I am only playing around with an idea that was worked out hundreds of years ago in Mantova. But perhaps that is the magic of a restaurant like Locanda – with a little imagination, the essential flavours and combinations of ingredients that have stayed in people's hearts and minds for centuries can be elevated into something glamorous.

What we do in the restaurant and what we do at home, however, are two different things. At home, the idea is to keep things simple. But if you can approach cooking for family and friends with a little of the organisation we need in a professional kitchen, *you* will enjoy a good meal as well, instead of being in the kitchen with smoke everywhere, and your hair standing on end, so when someone comes in and says, 'How are you?', you want to scream. Use this chapter more as a source of inspiration than as a series of recipes. You don't have to serve the dishes as individual starters, as we do in the restaurant. If you are having friends round, use the idea of shared antipasti to your advantage. Buy some good prosciutto, salami or mozzarella, which need nothing doing to them, then choose a few of the recipes and dedicate your time to working on them, doubling the quantities if necessary, so you can serve everything on big plates to hand round. You can make your dessert in advance too, so you have only a main course to cook, which can be as simple as you like. It is *my* job to stay in the kitchen and cook for people. Your job is to make life as easy as possible, so when your friends arrive you can just put everything down on the table and sit and have a drink and talk with them.







Insalate e condimenti Salads and dressings



At home in Corgeno I don't remember my grandmother ever making a salad that was a dish in its own right, or had any sophistication, but salads have become an important part of the way we eat now. As with all our dishes in the restaurant, we look to classic Italian combinations of ingredients and flavours for our inspiration. What is exciting is to play with whatever is in season and what is good from the market: porcini mushrooms in autumn, root vegetables in winter, asparagus in spring, tomatoes in summer.

Like any other dish, a good salad needs structure – different textures, such as something soft, something with a little crunch. Throw in some pomegranate seeds and people think you have done something fantastic. Italians often find it difficult to put fruit in salad, but a chef who has been a real inspiration to me is David Thompson at Nahm, such a clever man – I really like what he does with Thai food. I came up with the idea of putting pomegranate into a winter salad after eating at Nahm, and having a brilliant salty-sweet warm salad, layered up with leaves and peanuts and fruit such as mango and papaya – almost like a lasagne.

When we eat, we experience taste sensations in different parts of the mouth: sweet, sour, salty, bitter – and the most recently recognized, umami. Think about balancing ingredients that satisfy all these tastes, so that when you eat the salad it fills your whole mouth with flavour. A tomato can give sweetness; maybe you want something peppery, like rocket, or something aniseed, like raw fennel, which is so underused in salads in the UK. And remember that salad leaves all have different flavours and textures, so it is good to include a mixture.

I don't like to see ready-prepared salads and vegetables in supermarkets, though – all those bags of mixed leaves, looking perfect thanks to a little cocktail of pesticides and kept going in their 'modified-atmosphere' bags, alongside packets of ready-podded peas, and beans with their tops and tails cut off. Vegetables and leaves begin to lose some of their nutrients, especially vitamin C, the moment they are plucked or cut up, so who knows what value is left in pre-packaged ones by the time they reach your plate?

I know not many of us are lucky enough to do what my grandmother did and just go out into the garden and pick a few heads of this and a head of that, depending on what my grandfather had planted. But I would far rather buy a variety of different salads in their entirety at a farmers' market, from someone I know doesn't use chemicals, and mix them myself. What I get especially mad about are those bags of Cos lettuce with their little packets of ingredients ready to make Caesar salad. If you simply buy a head of lettuce, make up a vinaigrette and grate in some cheese, you achieve double the quality at half the price.

If you are serving salad leaves with hot ingredients – for example, seared scallops or grilled porcini mushrooms – try to use the more robust leaves, such as wild rocket, which will not 'cook' and wilt too quickly. And if you are serving your salad on individual plates and want it to look good, arrange the heavier ingredients on the plates first, then the lighter ones, such as leaves, on top.

Finally, you need careful seasoning and a good vinaigrette or other dressing to pull all the different elements together. Again, I love the way Thai people make dressings out of crushed peanuts, fish sauce and lime juice to bring everything together. That is what we are aiming at – to transform an assembly of ingredients into something exciting.



Olio d'oliva Olive oil



'Liquid gold'

In Italy, olive oil is still considered something you buy from someone you know, either direct from a small local producer, or via a shop that will probably only stock a few oils, mostly local. The bigger national companies often export more of their oil around the world than they sell at home in Italy. Margherita, my daughter, asked me one day why, when Noah sent one of the doves out from the ark, it flew back with an olive branch in its beak; and I explained to her that the olive – and the oil that is pressed from it – has always been seen as the fruit of peace, and often prosperity.

Olive oil has been made since around 5,000BC, first in ancient Greece and then in countries like Israel and Egypt, eventually being introduced to Italy by the Greeks around the eighth century BC. The Romans planted olive trees everywhere throughout their empire. It seems strange that something that has been made and used since ancient times should almost have been re-invented, at least outside of the Mediterranean countries, over the last twenty years or so, since everyone started talking about its health-giving properties. Good extra-virgin olive oil is rich in antioxidants that can help fight bad cholesterol and prevent heart attacks and cancer. Even in ancient times, however, people understood

that olive oil had special properties, that it was good for the body, and in some cultures it has an almost mythical significance. Homer called it ‘liquid gold’; and it was considered so precious that champion athletes at the Olympic Games were presented with it instead of medals. Olive branches were even found in Tutankhamun’s tomb, and Roman gladiators used oil on their wounded bodies. And as far back as 70AD, the Roman historian Pliny the Elder wrote that ‘olive oil and wine are two liquids good for the human body’.

The highest grade of oil, extra-virgin, firstly means that it is ‘virgin’ olive oil, that is, the liquid from the fruit is extracted purely by cold pressing – with no heat or chemicals used. Then, to be ‘extra-virgin’ and therefore the best quality, the oil must have less than 1 per cent oleic acidity – a higher percentage than this would suggest that the acids had been released because the fruit was damaged or had been roughly handled. If an oil is just labelled ‘olive oil’, it will be a blend of inferior oil that has been refined, probably using chemical treatment, and virgin oil.

When I was growing up in Lombardia we used very little olive oil, except in salads and minestrone, and what we had was the light gold, fruity, quite delicate oil from Liguria, made from Taggiasca olives, which I still love. There is also a beautiful, sophisticated oil from the Lombardia shores of Lago di Garda, which we use in Locanda. It is made right on the northern limits of where olives can grow and now has its own DOP (this means Denominazione di Origine Protetta, or Protected Designation of Origin, and any producers who want to use its symbol must meet strict criteria).



In our house in Corgeno, if an olive oil was peppery it was considered a defect, whereas in Britain, since everyone fell in love with Toscana, the deep green, peppery, often prickly oils that characterize that region are more fashionable. When I first came to London, Antony Worrall Thompson was *the* man at M n ge   Trois – and one of the first to serve little bowls of olive oil with the bread, instead of butter. His idea of oil was the more peppery the better. Then, when the River Cafe opened, Tuscan oil became even more popular. I remember when I was working at the Savoy; I took a bottle of River Cafe oil home to Corgeno. My dad tasted it and said, ‘Take it back to England!’ Peppery oil has its place, of course, but not for everything: if you steam a delicate fish, like sole, the sweetness of the fish juices can make a strong oil taste almost rancid. And if you use a peppery oil with an equally hot leaf, the two will just clash.

When I cook a dish from a particular area, I like to try the oil that comes from there too; as with all Italian food, local produce – even the oil – determines the flavours. In general, olives that have had more exposure to the sun and more dramatic variation in temperature between day and night give more peppery oils; whereas in more temperate areas, the oil is lighter. Even within a region, though, the character can vary dramatically, and from producer to producer, as so much depends on the variety of the fruit, the altitude at which it is grown, the time of harvest and the care taken in handling the olives. For example, Tuscan oils made from olives grown around the coast, which really soak in the sun, have a different character to those grown in the Chianti hills, which are picked when only just ripe, before the frost, and so can produce young, herbaceous, almost prickly oils. Umbria can make oil that is sweet and fruity, or spicy; Marche and Abruzzo tend to make oils that are similar to Tuscan ones, whereas the ones from Puglia (the biggest production area), Calabria and Sicilia are mostly intense, but they might be almondy or very green and grassy. In Sicilia there is also a rare and beautiful oil made from the Minuta olive, which is unusual for the island in that it is delicate and fruity.

I’m not suggesting you have a kitchen full of bottles, sitting around waiting to turn rancid, but it is good to taste a few different good quality oils from various regions and get to know the flavours that you like. Read the labels carefully first. Just because an oil is bottled in Italy doesn’t mean that the olives have been grown there, too. It hurts my heart to say it, but there is a big scam where olive oil is concerned. We sell millions of litres a year, but we don’t grow nearly enough olives for that. Instead, a poor farmer in somewhere like Spain or North Africa sends his olives to Italy, because the oil is worth more if it says on the bottle that it was ‘produced’ in Italy. That, to me, is completely wrong, because I believe first of all that an oil should have something of the character of the region it comes from, just as a wine should represent its ‘terroir’. And secondly, how much quality of the olives is lost in the transportation? If the farmer had pressed his olives there and then in his own country, I believe it would be better oil. Because of such problems, scientists are developing amazing tests that use infrared spectroscopy to detect the geographic origin of the oil and could be used in the future to prevent cheating, and the EC has tightened up the laws, so that if the olives are not grown in Italy, this should be declared on the label. Also, if a producer wants to say that his oil comes from a particular region, he must meet the strict criteria of the DOP or Indicazione Geografica Protetta (Protected Geographical Indication or PGI), which is awarded to food where at least one stage of production occurs in the traditional region, but doesn’t specify particular production methods.



However, if you want to be sure what you are buying is good quality, look for bottles that state that the oil has been made from olives grown, preferably handpicked, pressed and bottled on the same estate. Such oils are now being regarded almost like fine wines and, on the best estates, the olives will have been picked at just the right moment, to give the maximum flavour and the optimum level of health-giving polyphenols. They may cost you £15 a bottle, but what is that really – 20p per tablespoon? Not that much to pay for something so good for you, that gives so much pleasure and adds so much flavour to a dish. Think how much we pay for some bottled waters, when very little has been proved about their health-giving properties in comparison with olive oil.

When you taste an oil, do so like wine: pour some into a spoon or glass and check the aroma first; there should be a connection with the fruit there, rather than just an oiliness. Then taste, holding the oil in your mouth until you really experience the flavours.

What happens to the fruit on the tree and during the pressing is only part of the story. Just as important is the way it is bottled, and the way we the consumers store the oil, which must be away from heat, light and air, otherwise it will quickly lose its particularity, and its health-giving properties will begin to deteriorate. I only fully understood this from talking to Armando Manni, who makes the most expensive, but probably most healthy oil in the world, high up on Mount Amiata in Toscana. His oil has levels of polyphenols that can reach 450mg per litre, compared to 100-250mg in other high quality oils. It is truly beautiful, but most special because, in order to keep the oil as 'alive' and valuable to the health as the day it was bottled, instead of using clear glass to show off the colour of the oil he uses dark ultraviolet-resistant glass, and only tiny 100ml bottles. So when they are opened the oil won't deteriorate as quickly as it would in big bottles. He also treats the oil like wine in that he puts in a layer of inert gas to help prevent oxidation, before corking the bottles with a synthetic stopper, rather than cork, which he believes can contaminate the oil.

Cooking with olive oil

The last thing to know about the best extra-virgin olive oil is not to use it for frying. For a start, when it is heated to a high temperature it burns easily, changes flavour and the polyphenols begin to lose their properties. Use a lesser olive oil, or even a vegetable, sunflower, or other interesting oil, and keep your extra-virgin oil for making dressings, or drizzling over fish or pasta, so that it has the maximum impact.

Aceto Vinegar



‘A big, big difference to every salad you eat’

As with olive oil, the flavour of vinegar and how much you use of it is quite a subjective thing – if you were to eat a salad dressed the way my mother likes it, you might spit it out, because she loves the flavour of vinegar to come through really strongly. At home in Italy, there will always be one bowl of salad on the table just for her, and a big one for everyone else.

I use very little white wine vinegar; I prefer red wine vinegar, and what I actually like most of all is not officially classed as vinegar in Italy (which by law must have 6 per cent alcohol per volume) but is known as *condimento morbido* (*morbido* means ‘soft’). This is brewed in the same way as vinegar but is filtered through wood chips, which smooths it out and takes away some of the sharpness, leaving a ‘condiment’ with lower acidity and alcohol – only 3 per cent.

When we talk about good wine we often think of there being great merit if the production is small and intimate, but with wine *vinegar*, providing you begin with good grapes, there is no such advantage. You can make millions of litres and still have the same quality; it is like brewing beer. However, you can usually be sure that if you buy vinegar from a producer who makes good wine,

the vinegar will also be good quality. People tend to think that it isn't worth spending a few more pounds on a bottle of good vinegar. But, like I always say when people complain about the price of good olive oil, if you think about how little you use at a time, you are only talking about a few pence, which will make a big, big difference to every salad you eat. And the vinegar isn't going to go off, unless you actually put it in the sun with the top off and let it evaporate.

Balsamic vinegar, which comes from Modena and the surrounding region of Reggio Emilia, is something completely different, which I use only occasionally and sparingly. As far back as 1046, a visiting German Emperor, Henry II, wrote about a special vinegar which 'flowed in the most perfect manner', and it has been eulogised ever since as a mysterious, precious elixir. Originally, it was taken as a tonic as much as it was used in cooking – balsamic actually means 'health-giving'. However, it remained something of a local secret, made in small quantities that you used when a guest came to visit, or at Christmas, but not every day. In Lombardia, I never saw balsamic vinegar until I was about sixteen and started working in restaurants. We didn't even have any in the kitchen at La Cinzianella. Then, like sun-dried tomatoes, balsamic vinegar suddenly became fashionable all over the world, and people fell in love with it, using it for everything. Because the traditional production in and around Modena was so small, people began manufacturing it commercially to meet the demand – so now there is great confusion about what is the authentic vinegar, and what is just an industrial product that resembles it. In America, especially, there are even balsamic 'sauces', 'glazes' and 'creams' that you can buy in squeeze bottles, like ketchup.



Unlike other vinegars, true balsamic vinegar is made not from wine but from the must of the Trebbiano grape that has been cooked slowly to concentrate it. This is blended with aged wine vinegar, then matured for at least twelve years in a series or family ('acetaia') of barrels, which range downward in size, and are made from different woods (typically oak, cherry, chestnut, mulberry, ash and juniper), so that each adds its own character. Each year, as some of the vinegar evaporates, the smallest barrel is topped up with liquid decanted from the next smallest one, and so on, until finally, the last and largest barrel is topped up with freshly cooked must from the new grape harvest. It is a continuous complex, serious art, which produces a naturally thick, syrupy vinegar with a taste that should have a perfect balance of sweetness and acidity. (The barrels are traditionally stored in attics under the rooftops, where the heat of summer and then the cold of winter are intensified, as this naturally prompts the processes of fermentation and oxidization.)

In 1980 a controlled denomination of origin for the vinegar was set up, and by law, for a vinegar to be called *aceto balsamico tradizionale*, it has to be produced according to these methods and approved by the Consortium of Producers of Traditional Balsamic Vinegar (Consorzio fra Produttori di Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Reggio Emilia). If you are a producer, you must send your vinegar to them; they taste it blind and, if it is good enough quality, and meets all the requirements, they bottle it in their special tulip-shaped bottles. They then mark it with different coloured stamps: red for up to 50 years, silver for a minimum of 50 years, and gold for a minimum of 75 years. Production of this balsamic vinegar is very limited, and for some of the people who supply their vinegar to the *consorzio* it is almost more of a hobby than a business: some will only make 100 or so bottles a year. We are talking about vinegars that cost up to £100 a bottle, but when you taste the real thing, the experience is extraordinary.

There is another category of balsamic vinegar that is either produced outside the designated region of Reggio Emilia, and so cannot be called 'tradizionale', or is made by people who don't want to deal with the *consorzio* – maybe they have such a small production that it isn't worth their while. Or sometimes, producers of 'tradizionale' also make other, high quality vinegars that haven't been aged for so long. Such vinegars must be labelled *condimento* balsamic vinegar and although they can't be called 'tradizionale' they are made using identical methods, so they can be fantastic quality, and are usually cheaper. I have stayed near Modena and seen people go to the local producers with their own bottles, which the guys fill up for them – and it is beautiful vinegar – but, of course, you have to rely on local knowledge to find out where to go.

The big difficulty is over bottles that are just labelled 'aceto balsamico di Modena'. Ever since the world 'discovered' balsamic vinegar there has been a huge industrial production, which bears no relation to the true artisan product. The legal definition of this vinegar is very loose. Much of it is only white wine vinegar with caramel added. I could make it for you in a pot in the kitchen in 15 minutes – but what an insult to the people who have been making beautiful vinegar in the proper way for hundreds of years. Some of it, though, has been made in a way that is similar to the traditional methods, using at least some cooked grape must, and aged in wood for at least a few years. So how to tell? Often 'aceto balsamico' vinegar comes in elegant bottles, sealed with wax, with beautiful labels that suggest ancient traditions, but it is important not to be distracted by the lyrical descriptions that the producers tend to use, and go straight to the ingredients list. The first thing to be listed should be the must of the grape, and there should be no mention of caramel, or any added flavourings. Look for a vinegar that says it has been aged in wooden *barrels* – as 'aged in wood' can sometimes mean wood chips have been added as the vinegar ages.

There is yet another type of vinegar, called *vincotto* ('cooked wine'), which is similar to balsamic, made in a serious way but without the ageing and complexity. They say *vincotto* has its roots in the old Roman tradition of pressing grapes that had been partly dried, then fermenting them to make raisin wine. It became something farmers would make as a sweet dressing for festivals, or

as a tonic, but is now being produced commercially, using the Trebbiano grape in the North. As you move further south it is more likely to be made with the Negroamaro and the Black Malvasia, which are left to dry on the vine or on wooden frames before being ‘cooked’ and reduced for 24 hours. The syrup goes into small oak barrels with some of the ‘mother’ or ‘starter’ vinegar from their wine vinegar production, and it is then aged for four years.

In the kitchen at Locanda we use various different balsamic vinegars, and also sometimes *vincotto*, but for the table we use only the ‘tradizionale’, which we often dispense with great ceremony, using a syringe. It is very expensive but used sparingly it will last you a long time. I would say that if you can only afford to buy one bottle of it in your life, it is worth it, because only by tasting the true traditional vinegar can you begin to understand what balsamic vinegar is about. It is something I would like everyone around the world to experience, because then it can be used as a benchmark by which to judge other, less expensive, balsamic vinegars.

Almost everyone likes the taste of a true balsamic vinegar, kids especially. At one time, the only way we could get my daughter Margherita to eat a green bean salad was to toss it in balsamic vinegar. It is like a natural flavour-enhancer. Good balsamic vinegar needs to be used very simply, though, with specific ingredients. Its combination of sweetness and acidity is at its best with salty, fatty things: so a few drops are perfect with Parmesan, especially the concentrated flavour of an aged cheese. A lovely thing to serve before dinner with an aperitif is just a sliver of Parmesan on a spoon with a drop of vinegar on top. Or sometimes, when we have held parties at Locanda, we have put out half a wheel of Grana Padano cheese, which is similar to Parmesan (see page 209), so that people can pick up small pieces, drizzle over some vinegar and eat it with a glass of Prosecco. I always keep a good bottle of balsamic vinegar at home and sometimes, if I go home late at night from the kitchen, that is all I have – a big wedge of Parmesan with a little vinegar. Since both the cheese and the vinegar originate in the same region of Italy, there is an affinity there that comes with produce of the same land, and so the combination is very satisfying.

Sometimes we make *agnolotti* with Parmesan, tossed in a little butter, with a couple of drops of balsamic vinegar added; and I love to serve balsamic vinegar with pork belly, or with calves’ liver, in a simple sauce made with sultanas and nuts (see page 484). A little drop is amazing with plainly cooked wild salmon, and balsamic vinegar and strawberries is another famous combination.

I don’t think balsamic vinegar works with bland food. With a cheese like mozzarella, the effect is wasted, and I wouldn’t usually use it to dress a leaf salad, as it loses its impact, unless you are using strongly flavoured leaves like chicory, radicchio or rocket. And I completely disapprove of serving bread with a bowl each of oil and balsamic vinegar – oil yes, but if you dip good bread into balsamic vinegar, you ruin both things. For me it doesn’t work with complicated dishes either. If you were to spoon balsamic vinegar over an elaborate fish dish with lots of different elements, yes, it would add another level of flavour, but again it would be a waste of something special, that deserves to be treated with respect.



Dressings



There is no real Italian equivalent for the word ‘vinaigrette’ because traditionally, when you went into a restaurant and ordered a salad, they would bring the oil and vinegar, and some salt to the table – or if you wanted oil and lemon, you would just ask for *olio e limone*. Nowadays, if a salad comes ready-dressed, we just borrow the French term. Or we might use the word *condimento*, which can mean any kind of seasoning or flavouring as well as a dressing; or even *aspreto* – from *aspro* meaning sour. We usually use this term when we create a dressing in which there is an element that we have made ourselves – such as our saffron ‘vinaigrette’, which we would call Aspreto di zafferano.

When my brother, Roberto, and I were kids, we were sometimes taken to a local restaurant where dressing the salad was considered a bit of an art. Usually we didn’t want to eat salad at all; we just wanted to watch the waiter perform his ceremony at the table. He would take a silver spoon, put some salt into it, then pour in the vinegar and let the salt dissolve in it. Then he would drizzle a line of oil into the salad bowl and pour in the seasoned vinegar at the same time, so the two met in a stream. Finally, he would put in the leaves and toss everything together in front of us.

The point is that dressing salad leaves should be done at the very last moment before serving, to preserve some crunchiness. Wash the leaves well, trying not to squeeze them, let them drain naturally in a colander, then finish off in a salad spinner. Dress the leaves very lightly so that the dressing just coats them, without drowning, and when you toss everything together, really lift up the leaves so that the dressing coats every single one.

If you are dressing a more complex salad that includes other ingredients besides leaves, think about their consistency before you add the dressing. It is only the delicate leaves that need to be dressed at the last minute, so if, for example, you are making a rocket and tomato salad, the heavier, denser tomato will need more seasoning – earlier – than the rocket. What I would do is put the tomatoes in the salad bowl with some dressing, season them and leave them for ten minutes or so to soak up the flavours and release the juices that the salt will bring out. Then, at the last minute, I would throw in the rocket and toss everything together, adding a little more vinaigrette if necessary – a lovely thing to do at the table.

I can never understand why people buy ready-made vinaigrette in a bottle when there can hardly be anything simpler than mixing together some good oil and vinegar, seasoning it with a little salt (I also add some water, just to soften the dressing), putting it into a bottle with a cork in it and storing it in the fridge. That's it. My children make vinaigrette at home without even thinking about it. So how can commercial manufacturers tell us that what they put in a bottle is better? Some of them seem to have invented a machine that leaves the dressing in a state of permanent emulsion, which people think must be a good thing. But all you have to do to emulsify a dressing is shake your bottle of oil and vinegar.

There is, of course, no rule that says you must use olive oil for everything – not even in an Italian kitchen would we be that partisan. Sometimes we use other oils, including walnut and hazelnut, to give a different taste to a salad. Just think about your flavours before you add a very distinctive-tasting oil, so that your ingredients and your dressing complement each other and you have no violent clashes.

Giorgio's vinaigrette

The reason this is called Giorgio's vinaigrette is not that I am doing anything special – millions of people around the world make exactly the same thing. It just happened that when I was at Zafferano there was a young Algerian chef who could never remember which dressing was which, because we used several in our kitchen. We would shout to him, 'Vinaigrette!' and he would say, 'What does it look like?' Eventually he stuck a label on each bottle and he called this basic vinaigrette, with oil and vinegar, 'Giorgio's vinaigrette' – so the name has stuck.

I like to mix the vinegar and oil in the ratio of one part to six, but the flavour of vinaigrette is a very subjective thing and everyone has their own ideas. Personally, I don't like to use a strong Tuscan oil, nothing too peppery and strong for vinaigrette, and you might prefer to add more or less vinegar. It also depends on the quality of the vinegar and its alcohol level. Make up some vinaigrette, taste it and adjust it as you like. The important thing to remember is that if you try it neat, it will taste more powerful than when you mix it with a salad. So, either test it with some leaves, or do what I suggest to my chefs: take a little of the dressing on a spoon, put it into your mouth, then suck it in quickly – it should be sharp enough to make you cough slightly, but not so strong that it really catches in your throat.

Buy the best quality oil and vinegar you can afford, because you can't put in flavour that isn't already there. And make up a big bottle, so that you use it all the time. I would be a very happy man if every British family had a bottle of Giorgio's homemade vinaigrette in the fridge.

Put the salt into a bowl, then add the vinegar and leave for a minute so the salt dissolves.

Whisk in the olive oil and the water until the vinaigrette emulsifies and thickens.

Pour into a bottle, seal and store in the fridge, where it will keep for up to 6 months. It will separate out again into oil and vinegar, so before you use it, just shake the bottle.

Makes about 375ml

½ teaspoon sea salt

3 tablespoons red wine vinegar

300ml extra-virgin olive oil

2 tablespoons water

Aspretto di zafferano Saffron vinaigrette

Makes about 750ml

500ml white wine

150ml white wine vinegar

1 level teaspoon saffron strands

1 tablespoon caster sugar

100ml extra-virgin olive oil

Put the white wine, vinegar and saffron into a pan over a low heat and bring to the boil. Simmer until reduced by three-quarters, then remove from the heat, stir in the sugar until dissolved and leave to cool. Whisk in the oil.

Store the vinaigrette in the fridge, where it will keep for up to 6 months in a screw-topped jar or bottle – or a squeezezy plastic one. Take it out of the fridge half an hour or so before you need it, and shake to emulsify before use.

Condimento allo scalogno Shallot vinaigrette

Makes about 250ml

2 banana shallots or

4 ordinary shallots

75ml red wine vinegar

150ml extra-virgin olive oil

salt and pepper

Finely chop the shallots, then put them in a bowl and season with salt and pepper.

Add the vinegar and leave to stand for 30 minutes.

Whisk in the oil and use straight away.

Condimento all'aceto balsamico Balsamic vinaigrette

Makes about 350ml

1 teaspoon salt

250ml balsamic vinegar

100ml extra-virgin olive oil

Put the salt into a bowl, then add the vinegar and leave for a minute so the salt dissolves. Whisk the oil into the vinegar.

This will keep in the fridge for up to 6 months in a screw-topped jar or bottle – or a squeezzy plastic one. Take it out of the fridge half an hour or so before you need it, and shake to emulsify before use.

Olivo e limone Oil and lemon dressing

Makes about 200ml

pinch of salt

3 tablespoons lemon juice

150ml extra-virgin olive oil

Put the salt into a screw-topped bottle or jar, then add the lemon juice and leave for a minute so the salt dissolves.

Add the oil, put the top on, and shake well to emulsify. It is best to use this dressing immediately.

Maionese Mayonnaise

Makes about 600ml

1 egg yolk

pinch of salt

1 teaspoon English mustard

2 tablespoons white wine vinegar

500ml vegetable oil

juice of ½ lemon

Put the egg yolk in a mixing bowl and break it up a bit.

Add the salt and mustard with half of the vinegar and whisk together for a couple of minutes (this is very important as it helps the mayonnaise to emulsify once you start to put in the oil).

Slowly start to add the oil, whisking continuously, until it is completely incorporated. If it starts to get too thick, add the rest of the vinegar; and if it is still too thick add a tablespoon of hot water – just enough to loosen.

When the oil is completely incorporated, add the lemon juice and adjust the seasoning to your taste – add a little more vinegar or lemon juice if you like it a little more sharp.



Seasoning



‘All about balance’

At home, when I cook something that Plaxy regularly makes, my kids often say my version tastes different – the reason, I think, is the seasoning. I was shocked the first time I saw chefs using salt in a restaurant kitchen because the proportions seemed enormous: handfuls were going into every pot, over meat, fish, vegetables. I remember going home to my grandmother and saying: ‘They use so much more salt than you.’

As a chef, you are taught to see salt in a different way. You have to think about how we taste our food; receiving different sensations in different parts of the mouth. If you under-season, you are taking away a whole layer of flavour; if you over-season, you block out all the other sensations. Salt can also help you experience sweet flavours in a more pronounced way. Heston Blumenthal of the Fat Duck in Bray does an experiment with a glass of tonic water – if you keep adding salt a little at a time, it gets to the point where it tastes sweeter; then obviously if you carry on, the saltiness takes over. At Locanda, we do a tomato ‘soup’ for a dessert with basil ice cream. When we first made it, we served it with sweet sablé biscuits, then we tried it with slightly salty biscuits, and the difference was amazing.

Seasoning is all about balance; so you must be constantly tasting and adjusting. Of course, it is also true that taste is a subjective thing, and I would never be so precious as to get angry with anyone in the restaurant who wanted to add extra seasoning to their food, as some chefs famously have. I only hope that people taste first.

These days everyone is rightly concerned about the quantity of salt that children, in particular, are eating, but most of the damage is done not when we cook fresh food, but by the salt we often unconsciously eat in processed food. Also, if you taste and season carefully as you are cooking, allowing the salt time to dissolve and do its job of flavouring properly, you will end up using far less than if you taste at the end, panic because everything is bland, and start seasoning crazily.

Most chefs have cut back the quantity of salt in cooking over the years, and looked for different ways of amplifying tastes, for example bubbling up juices and sauces in the pan, so that they reduce and thicken, and the flavour intensifies. Also, we are constantly trying to find producers and farmers who value traditional methods and believe that flavour is more important than fast-grown, perfect-looking homogenous products that will please the supermarkets. So, when you have a carefully and slowly reared, properly hung piece of meat, a terrific vegetable that has not been forced under glass, or a fish straight from the boat, you don't need to season heavily, or you will distort the essential flavours.

On the other hand, everyone is crying, 'salt, salt, salt!' as if it is a demon, but we all need a certain amount of it for our bodies to function properly.



We can take a lesson from the behaviour of animals in the wild whose trails will often lead to natural sources of salt, because it is essential for them to stay alive. I remember reading about the big apes, the ones that are so human that they look like us and have a ‘wife’ and family – at certain times of the year they will head towards mountains which they know form natural rock salt and lick the salt.

Because we are so used to refrigeration, we underestimate the importance that salt has played in our civilisation and politics. As well as keeping the body healthy, and flavouring food, when it was first discovered that you could use it to extract moisture from meat or fish, and therefore cure and preserve foods so you had something to eat all year round, it must have seemed a magical thing. No wonder whole communities were built around the production and trade of something so precious. In

Italy, Venezia owes much of its splendour to its position at the centre of the salt trade (along with Genova). Roads were built especially to transport salt; wars were fought over it, taxes raised on it – all of which Mark Kurlansky brings together in his brilliant book called *Salt: A World History*.

The first proper salt works date back to 640BC, when one of the early Roman kings, Ancus Martius, built an enclosed basin at Ostia and let in seawater, which evaporated under the sun, leaving behind sea salt. The road that the salt travelled in order to be sold was called the Via Salaria, and the soldiers who protected it were often paid in salt, which is where the word ‘salary’ comes from. If someone didn’t do his job properly he was considered ‘not worth his salt’. The word salami (pork preserved with salt) comes from the Latin ‘sal’ for salt, as does salad (it was used to describe the Roman way of adding salt to greens and herbs, perhaps to draw out bitter juices in the way that we do with aubergines, then dressing them with oil and vinegar).

We have Parma ham because people in the region needed to preserve meat, and salt could be brought in from Venezia, with payment in either money or hams. Of course, there was a massive trade in smuggling in order to avoid paying the taxes that were levied on salt. The route the smugglers used is called La Via del Sale (the road of salt) and runs all the way from the Appenninos to Liguria. Nowadays part of the route is used for a fantastic endurance motorbike race, also called La Via del Sale.

What we are talking about is natural sea or rock salt, very different from ‘table salt’, which is bleached and refined, often has chemicals added and has a harshly salty flavour. I always thought what a great job it would be to spend your days skimming off the perfect little crystals at some natural saltpan, somewhere wild and beautiful. This is the kind of salt you can pack around a piece of meat or fish for baking in the way that has been done for thousands of years. (Originally, you would have dug a pit in the ground, put in the fish or meat in its salt crust, covered it over and built a fire over the top.) As it cooks, the salt crust becomes rock hard, sealing in all the moisture and juices, and gently seasoning at the same time, but without making the cooked meat or fish taste ‘salty’.

When Thomas Keller, the inspirational chef of the French Laundry in California, came to Locanda to eat, we got talking and he told me about the way he served foie gras with five different salts, including Dead Sea Salt and Jurassic Salt. When he went back to America he sent me some of the Jurassic Salt, which is mined in Utah. It is incredible to think that it comes from a geological layer underneath that of the dinosaurs. At one time most of North America was covered in shallow sea, which evaporated over millions of years, leaving behind the salt, then in the Jurassic era volcanoes erupted around the old seabed and sealed the salt inside volcanic ash. The salt comes in a pinkish block that you have to grate, and it has a flavour that is amazing; it almost has a fizzy character to it. We sprinkled it over some carpaccio and served it with nothing else but a piece of lemon and it was beautiful.



When you are seasoning, it is important to remember that salt has the function of extracting moisture as well as flavouring. You need to season meat or fish before you start to cook it, because once the outside has been sealed, your salt and pepper won't penetrate in the same way. However, once you season a piece of meat or fish with salt, it will start to 'sweat' out its juices, so if you do this too far ahead of cooking it the flesh will become tougher. The trick is to season your meat or fish with salt and pepper *just* before you cook it – then, especially if you are cooking it over a high heat, the meat will be properly seasoned, and the salt and pepper will help form a nice 'crust' around the outside of the meat, while the juices will be sealed inside.

With some dishes you also need to consider how much salt is contained in the ingredients you are cooking before you add any extra. I will only taste and season a risotto, for example, right at the end, because you are working with a lightly seasoned stock all the way through, which will intensify in flavour as it reduces, and then it will be finished with pecorino or Parmesan, which is also quite salty.

And remember that when you cook beans or pulses in water, unlike other vegetables, they should only be seasoned at the end of cooking, as the salt will draw the moisture from their skins and toughen them up if you put it in at the beginning.

At home, we always have a pot of sea salt crystals in the kitchen, which we keep away from the heat and moisture from the steam around the cooker, so that it keeps dry. Then we put a little of it into the grinder at a time.

Always also use freshly ground black pepper, which has much more warmth and aroma and a cleaner taste than white pepper. As with all spices, the flavour is held in the volatile oils inside the peppercorns, which are quickly lost once they are released; so ready-ground pepper, especially if it is exposed to warmth or sunlight, will lose its potency very quickly. I hate big pepper grinders, not only because they remind me of the way many 'Italian' restaurants were when I first came to England, but because everyone fills them up and leaves them for years. I prefer small ones which you can fill with a couple of teaspoonfuls of freshly bought peppercorns on a regular basis.

Prezzemolo e aglio Parsley and garlic



‘Such an Italian flavour’

Parsley and garlic... The mixture has such an Italian flavour. It has become a joke in our house that whenever I am wondering what to cook – ‘Shall I do this? Shall I do that?’ – Plaxy always tells me, ‘Just do your parsley and garlic!’ She knows that whatever I do, I will use them, and also that by the time I have stopped talking and finished chopping, I will have decided what I am going to cook.

Every morning in the restaurant kitchen, one of our jobs is to chop parsley and garlic, ready to sprinkle into dishes whenever needed. We put the garlic cloves on a chopping board and squash them to a rough paste with the back of a knife. Then we put the parsley on top and chop it quite finely, so that the crushed garlic is chopped too. That way the garlic becomes almost a pulp, and it releases its flavours into the parsley and vice versa.

By parsley, I mean flat-leaf parsley, not the curly sort that was once the only kind available in the UK. The first time I saw curly parsley, I thought it looked beautiful – but then it was the *nouvelle cuisine* era.

Now I can't imagine cooking with anything else but the flat-leaf variety, which has a much more refined flavour – though I have had a few discussions about the merits of curly parsley with Fergus Henderson of St John restaurant. A big champion of English food, and one of the few chefs I know who loves to use the curly variety, he persuaded me to try it chopped in a salad, and it wasn't bad. Not bad at all.

Caponata

Caponata is a Sicilian dish of aubergines and other vegetables, cut into cubes and deep-fried, then mixed with sultanas and pine nuts, and marinated in an *agrodolce* (sweet-and-sour) sauce. In some parts of Sicilia, it is traditional to mix in little pieces of dark bitter chocolate. Because it is such a Southern dish, I had never even tasted it until I started cooking at Olivo. Then, one day when we were looking for something sweet and sour as an accompaniment, I found the recipe in a book and I remember thinking: ‘This will never work!’ But we made it, the explosion of flavour was



brilliant, and it has become one of my favourite things. You can pile caponata on chunks of bread, or serve it with mozzarella or fried artichokes (see page 70). Because it is vinegary, it is fantastic with roast meat, as it cuts through the fattiness, particularly of lamb. Traditionally it is also served with seafood – perhaps grilled or fried scallops (see page 108), prawns or red mullet. With red mullet, I like to add a little more tomato to the caponata.

We often cut some fresh tuna into 4cm dice and either sauté it in olive oil or grill it until it is golden on the outside but still rare inside (to test whether it is ready, cut open a piece and it should be a nice rose colour in the centre). Then we add the tuna to the caponata just before serving and toss everything together well.

If you don't like fennel or celery, leave them out and increase all the other ingredients slightly. Keep in mind that this is not a fixed recipe; it is something that is done according to taste and you can change it as you like.

- 1 large aubergine
- olive oil for frying
- 1 onion, cut into 2cm dice
- vegetable oil for deep-frying
- 2 celery stalks, cut into 2cm dice
- ½ fennel bulb, cut into 2cm dice
- 1 courgette, cut into 2cm dice
- 3 fresh plum tomatoes, cut into 2cm dice
- bunch of basil
- 50g sultanas
- 50g pine nuts
- about 100ml extra-virgin olive oil
- 5 tablespoons good quality red wine vinegar
- 1 tablespoon tomato passata
- 1 tablespoon caster sugar
- salt and pepper

Cut the aubergine into 2cm cubes, sprinkle with salt and leave to drain in a colander for at least 2 hours. Squeeze lightly to get rid of excess liquid.

Heat a little olive oil in a pan and gently sauté the onion until soft but not coloured. Transfer to a large bowl.

Put the vegetable oil in a deep-fat fryer or a large, deep saucepan (no more than one-third full) and heat to 180°C. Add the celery and deep-fry for 1-2 minutes, until tender and golden. Drain on kitchen paper.

Wait until the oil comes back up to the right temperature, then put in the fennel. Cook and drain in the same way, then repeat with the aubergine and courgette.

Add all the deep-fried vegetables to the bowl containing the onion, together with the diced tomatoes.

Tear the basil leaves and add them to the bowl with all the rest of the ingredients, seasoning well. Cover the bowl with cling film while the vegetables are still warm and leave to infuse for at least 2 hours before serving at room temperature. Don't put it in the fridge or you will dull the flavours. It is this process of 'steaming' inside the cling film and cooling down very slowly that changes caponata from a kind of fried vegetable salad, with lots of different tastes, to something with a more unified, distinctive flavour.

Deep-frying

People think deep-frying is easy, but it isn't at all, and it can be dangerous. If you shallow-fry something you can touch and turn it easily, but with deep-frying you enter into a contract with the oil in which you have no control. Little home fryers are brilliant because they have safety mechanisms and you can set the temperature, which is so important, to avoid having something which is burnt on the outside and raw on the inside, or vice versa. If you *must* use a pan never put more than 1.5 litres in a 5-litre pot as not only will the level rise when you add your ingredients, but oxygen is released and so the expansion will be even greater. And use a thermometer.

Insalata di radicchio, prataioli e gorgonzola piccante/dolce Radicchio salad with button mushrooms and Gorgonzola dressing

In Lombardia, we call Gorgonzola *erborinato*, after the ‘parsley green’ colour of the mould. In the old days, it was made in damp caves around the Lombardia town of Gorgonzola, where it was left for up to a year so the mould developed naturally. Nowadays the mould is introduced by piercing the cheese with steel or copper needles when it is around a month old. In the restaurant, we use ninety-day-old Gorgonzola, which is harder and saltier (*piccante*), instead of the young creamy one (*dolce*), but you could use either.

- 2 small round heads of radicchio
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 4 handfuls of button mushrooms, sliced
- ½ wine glass of white wine
- 60g mature Gorgonzola cheese
- 2-3 tablespoons mayonnaise (see page 53)
- 1 garlic clove
- handful of flat-leaf parsley
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- salt and pepper

Clean the radicchio, removing all the white parts from the base and keeping the small red leaves whole. Tear the larger leaves into halves or quarters.

Heat the olive oil in a pan, add the mushrooms and sauté until golden. Add the wine and stir until that has evaporated. Season, remove from the heat and keep warm.

Break up the Gorgonzola and melt it gently in a bowl placed over a pan of simmering water until it is creamy. Allow to cool slightly and mix into the mayonnaise to make a dressing.

Squash the garlic to a paste with the back of a knife, put the parsley leaves on top and chop it, so that the two combine.

Season the radicchio and toss with the extra-virgin olive oil. Arrange the radicchio in nests on 4 serving plates, so the whole leaves are around the outside. Mix the parsley and garlic with the mushrooms and spoon into the middle. Drizzle with the Gorgonzola dressing and serve.

Insalata di porcini alla griglia Chargrilled cep salad

This is a dish for those times when you go shopping and just happen to see fantastic fresh porcini (see page 232). Whenever I find them, I buy a kilo, use some for a risotto, put some in a veal stew and keep back the most beautiful ones to grill for this salad. In the restaurant, we serve quite a smart porcini salad with reduced veal stock and *beurre fondu* drizzled around the plate. This is too complicated to do at home, but it is just as good simply to grill the mushrooms, dusted with chopped garlic and parsley, as suggested below, and then rub your plates with a cut lemon before you put the porcini on them.

½ garlic clove

2 handfuls of flat-leaf parsley

300g small porcini (cep) mushrooms (see page 239 for preparation)

a little extra-virgin olive oil

½ lemon

2 handfuls of mixed green salad leaves

5 celery stalks, cut into matchstick strips

50g Parmesan

4 tablespoons Oil and lemon dressing (see page 52)

small bunch of chives, cut into batons

salt and pepper

Preheat the grill or, preferably, a ridged griddle pan. Squash the garlic to a paste with the back of a knife, then put the parsley on top and chop it so that the two mix together well.

Cut the mushrooms lengthways into slices about 5mm thick (cutting through the stem, too) and reserve any trimmings. Season the slices and brush with extra-virgin olive oil, then dust with the parsley and garlic mixture.

Grill the porcini slices, turning them over to cook the other side as soon as they start to brown. Rub the serving plate or plates with the halved lemon and arrange the porcini on top.

Slice any reserved porcini trimmings very finely and mix with the salad leaves and celery strips. Grate about 2 tablespoons of the Parmesan, season the salad and mix with the grated cheese.

Toss the salad with the dressing, then pile it on top of the porcini and scatter with the chives. Shave the rest of the Parmesan and sprinkle it over the top.



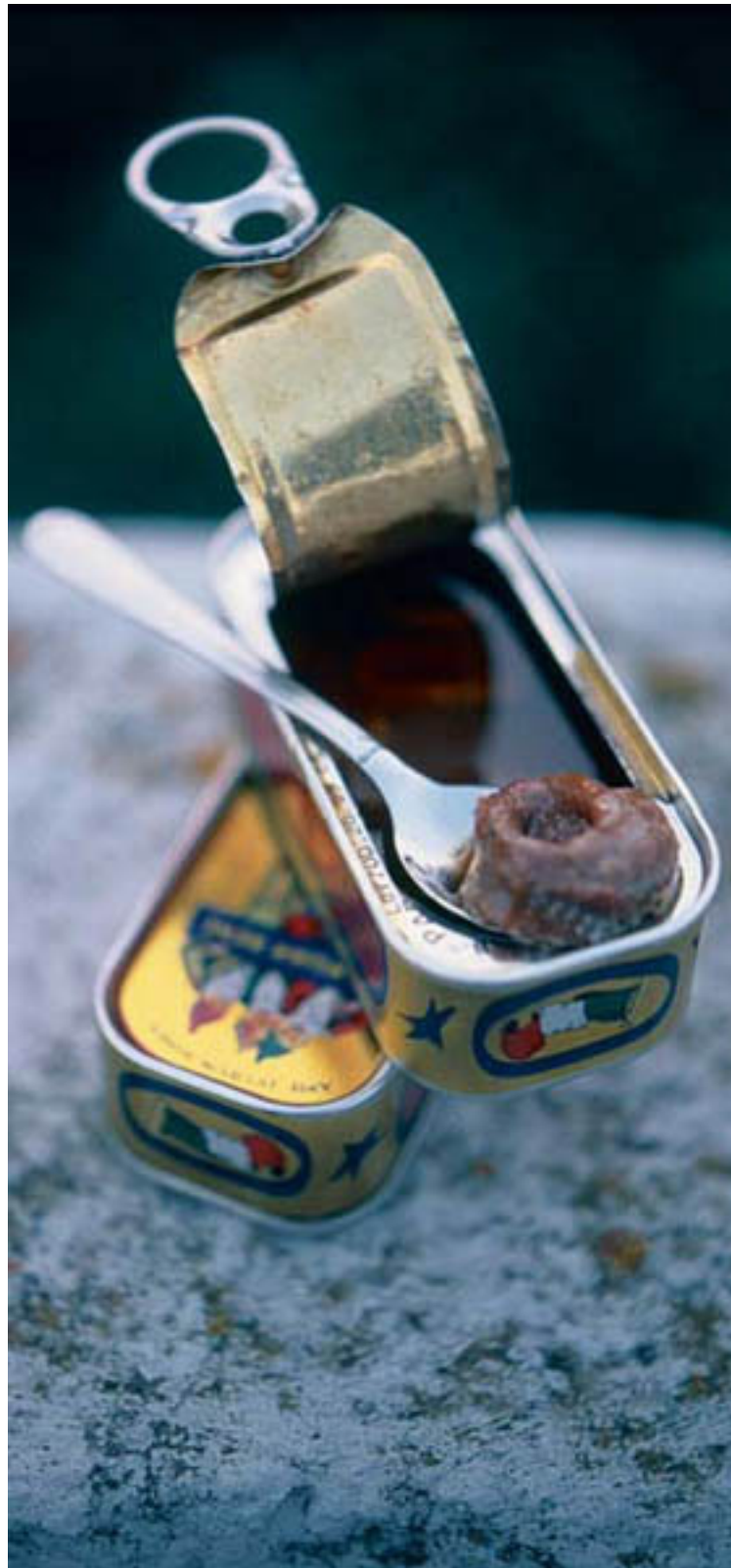
Acciughe Anchovies



‘A fish that deserves respect’

Sometimes it seems to me that people in the UK don't think of the anchovy as a fish at all, but as something in a category all of its own, that goes on top of pizza or into a *salade niçoise*. In Italy, though, we have a great respect for anchovies. The ancient Romans ate them fresh and it is thought that, together with sardines and mackerel, they also saturated them in salt and let them ferment in the sun, sometimes adding herbs and wine, to make a sauce called *liquamen* for seasoning food – rather like Thai fish sauce. In the North, they sometimes add anchovies to *osso buco*. In Sicilia, they like to cook them *al beccafico* – boned, sprinkled with a little vinegar, covered in breadcrumbs and herbs and grilled or baked. In Trentino-Alto Adige, they specialise in *speck* (the hind leg of the pig, cured in salt, pepper, juniper and bay, then smoked over wood and juniper berries), which they serve with anchovies mashed into butter. In the South, anchovies are used in a sauce for pasta.

When I was a child, at Christmas and on special occasions, such as my grandfather's birthday, we used to have anchovies in *salsa piccante* (the only time I ever tasted chilli when I was growing up), which came in small gold tins decorated with three little dwarves, like the ones in *Snow White*, wearing yellow, red and green hats. They were made by a company called Rizzoli in Parma, who still produce them, in a sauce they have been making to a secret recipe for a hundred years. Whenever I go to Italy and see the gold tins in a delicatessen, I still can't resist them.



Another thing I adore is dissolved or ‘melted’ (*sciolte*) anchovies. You put some anchovies into a pan with some olive oil, turn on the heat and warm gently to ‘melt’ the anchovies, rather than fry them, or they will lose their flavour. If you buy 500g salted anchovies, rinse off the salt, dry them, then ‘melt’ them like this; you can transfer the paste to a sterilised jar and cover it with a layer of olive oil. It will keep for six months in the fridge, so you can take it out and spoon some over pasta whenever you want. ‘Melted-down’ anchovies are the basis of the famous Piemonte autumn dish,

bagna càôda, which literally means ‘warm bath’ (see page 146). Like so many Piemontese recipes, it is a dish that needs lots of people to gather round the table with a bottle of good Barolo and share big plates of vegetables, usually raw but sometimes boiled, which you dip into the *bagna càôda*. It is made with anchovies, garlic (soaked first in milk), oil and butter, and is kept warm in an earthenware pot over a spirit flame in the middle of the table. Sometimes, when only a little of the sauce is left, people break in some eggs and scramble them. Such a fantastic convivial thing to do.

It is a funny thing that Piemonte, one of the only regions of Italy that doesn’t touch the sea, has a dish based on anchovies as one of its specialities. The reason is historical. About 300 years ago, the Piemontese people harvested salt and made butter in the mountains. These were traded along the ancient salt routes in return for anchovies from Liguria. A traditional thing that many Piemonte bars do in the early evening is to put out little sandwiches made with butter and anchovies, which you can eat with a glass of wine. Even now, there are still associations of *anciue* (anchovy sellers) in and around the old trading town of Val Maira that hold dinners to celebrate the relationship between salt, anchovies and butter.

In British fish markets, you rarely find the blue-green and silver fresh anchovies. So you usually have to buy them either still on the bone and preserved in salt (the fish are layered with sea salt in small barrels), or filleted and preserved in olive oil. Frequently in the UK, though, the oil is cheap and tastes rancid, and if the fillets are in upright jars they are squashed in so tightly that the ones in the centre become mashed and broken (the fillets laid flat in tins are better), so I always prefer to buy the ones in salt. I have to admit that I buy Spanish ones, because the quality is so good. You have first to soak them in water to get rid of excess salt, then take out the bones and pat the fish dry. Then you can either marinate them in good olive oil, a little vinegar and some chopped herbs and serve them as part of an antipasti, or use them in whatever recipe you want.



Insalata di puntarelle, capperi e acciughe **Puntarelle salad with capers and anchovies**

Puntarelle is difficult to get in this country, but beautiful, especially raw, rinsed and kept in a bowl of ice cubes to get rid of the bitterness. It's a real thirst-quencher. When people ask me what puntarelle is like, I usually compare it to fennel, because they share very similar characteristics, apart from the aniseed flavour of fennel. The puntarelle season runs from October to January/February, but as the time goes on it can become more bitter and woody, so you need to wash it much more, and also eventually discard the tougher parts. Otherwise, the closest you can get is chicory, cut into strips, but don't put these in ice.

When we make this dish, we usually discard the outer leaves of the puntarelle, but, if you like, you can keep them to serve as an accompaniment to fish or meat, especially barbecued meat. Blanch the leaves briefly in boiling salted water, then drain, chop and sauté in a little olive oil. Mix with some toasted pine nuts and some sultanas that have been soaked in water for half an hour or so to plump them up. You could even add the mixture to this salad – spoon it on to your plates first, then arrange the salad on top.

2 tomatoes

2 heads of puntarelle.(or chicory)

8 anchovy fillets

2 tablespoons baby capers (or 3 tablespoons larger capers)

small bunch of chives, cut into batons

4 tablespoons Oil and lemon dressing (see page 52)

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

salt and pepper

Blanch the tomatoes, skin, quarter and deseed (see page 304).

Discard the outer green leaves of the puntarelle, slice the hearts very thinly lengthways, then wash well under cold running water until the water is clear – the puntarelle will turn the water green at first – to take away some of the bitterness. When you serve the puntarelle it needs to be really crisp, so put it into a bowl with some ice cubes and leave in the fridge for a couple of hours, adding more ice if necessary, and it will curl up beautifully.

Drain the puntarelle well and pat dry. In a bowl, mix together the tomatoes, anchovies, capers, chives and finally the puntarelle. Season, but be careful with the salt, as the anchovies and capers will add quite a lot of saltiness. Toss with the oil and lemon dressing and serve as quickly as possible, drizzled with the olive oil.



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