



Travellady Magazine

The Piedmont Sensations

by Agnes Chung

Set in the heart of the serene, timeless town of Cortemilia in Cuneo, Piedmont is Villa San Carlo. Owner and hotelier, Carlo Zarri and his family have been welcoming and pampering guests with Piedmontese cooking and hospitality for four generations. Carlo took over the family business in 1997 -- first working at the front desk, and later in the kitchen where he honed his culinary skills with his dad as his mentor. In 2000, he took over the reins from his father, and has been cooking ever since.

The Piedmont Team

Carlo Zarri was in Vancouver, Canada two winters ago to showcase the Piedmont region. Joining him were Marco Benente, his Sous Chef; Pier Paolo Porcu of agriturismo Castelmartino, Cortemilia; Fabio Fresia of agriturismo La Costa, Torre Bormida; Barbara Molinari of Saporì da Scaletta in Castelletto Uzzone and Silvia Crucitti of Consorzio Turistico Langhe Monferrato Roero

Is it the heat and energy in the kitchen or the minestrone soup that kept them peppy despite the long Trans-Atlantic flight, I wondered? Yummy, looks like it's going to be a feast "fit for a king"-- canapés, ravioli, risottos and soups, truffles, hazelnut candies and cakes, I remarked -- as my eyes scanned the platters on the kitchen tables.



In the dining room, a queue was quickly forming for a taste of the freshly shaved truffles on delicious pea soup and risottos (Risotto al Tartufo -- risotto with white truffles). Oohs and ahs echoed through the room as guests savour their first bite of the freshly shaved truffles. Wow, was it ever intoxicating -- my nose fired up on taking a whiff of the knobby, woody-looking fungus, particularly the white truffles. This diamond of the culinary world has a strong complex earthy, nutty, meaty aroma and taste, somewhat between a cross of a garlicky mushroom and aged cheese.

Exquisite Delights - Piedmont Sensation



Scientifically known as Tuber Magnatum Pico, Alba white truffle is one of the most expensive and rare food globally. Price ranges between US\$2,000 to US\$4,000 per kg. The more abundant black truffle is less expensive -- it goes for US\$400 to US\$500 per kg. Both white and black truffles may look unappealing, but taste like heaven -- they bring out intense, yet simple and exquisite flavours -- and add a totally new dimension to the dishes when thinly shaved over simple food like risottos, ravioli, scrambled eggs, light fish, meat dishes and salad. Truffles are purported to have aphrodisiac properties creating a euphoric high. Wines indigenous to the Langhe and Monferrato region -- like Barolo, Barbaresco, Barbera, Dolcetto and Nebiolo -- pair well with truffles.

Equally long was the line at the neighbouring cooking station where Barbara was busy sautéing hand-made, lip smacking Piedmont ravioli with herb and butter. The soft and very tasty ravioli deserved an A plus rating. Over at the dessert tables, fresh harvested whole Lange sweet round hazelnuts (Tonda Gentile della Langa) and hazelnuts balls were disappearing fast from the platters.



"People think that Italian food is spaghetti and pizza -- once in Italy, they discover that traditional food changes from region to region, from valley to valley -- and understand that cooking is not only a fashion, but also a tradition and a passion", said Carlo.

In his cookbook, Piedmont Sensations - A Journey through the Garden of Delights, Carlo provides readers with informative descriptions of food and wines produced in Piedmont, the various attractions, restaurants, accommodations and itinerary ideas. A definite "must have" for any Piedmont-bound traveller.

Truffle Chef



Professional chef and author, Carlo Zarri is also a certified sommelier, tour operator, and multi-linguist -- speaking fluent Italian, German, French and English. More aptly named the "Truffle Chef" as his unique talents and broad spectrum of experience makes him as rare and sought after as the truffles that grow in Piedmont.

A supporter of the Slow Food Movement, he strongly believes in the farm-to-table concept. Carlo creates his dishes using fresh, locally grown Piedmont products like truffles, hazelnuts, mushrooms, chestnuts, cured meats, cheeses -- and adds a modern twist to his traditional Piedmontese recipes. Over the last 15 to 20 years, he said, "There has been an evolution in Italian food, however, the basics of Italian cooking is still maintained. Cooking is a tradition and an art. My cooking style is traditional cooking personalized to my taste. A chef does well if his or her food is appreciated by diners." Every dish is prepared and presented with great care and attention. His cheerful, creative personality shows in his cooking. The secret to his scrumptious dishes -- a dash of love

combined with fresh, quality Piedmont ingredients. A happy, innovative chef using high quality products equals a happy belly and contented diner.

Villa San Carlo

It's no surprise why diners travel to Cortemilia just to experience the cuisine and hospitality at Villa San Carlo -- an award winning 21-room boutique hotel with a cosy 25-seat restaurant set in the countryside of the Upper Langa. Villa San Carlo is a gourmet destination in its own right. When a guest reserves a room, he or she also books a restaurant table. Business is seasonal, and operates from March to November. Carlo chuckled, "We care about the number of tables we sell, not the number of rooms."



While Carlo is busy creating gourmet delights in the kitchen, his wife, Paola, a certified sommelier manages the front operation of their hotel and cosy, romantic restaurant. The restaurant's wine list is rated among the top five best in Italy with a selection of over 1,000 wines from Piedmont and round the world. Over 85 per cent of their guests are Germans and Swiss. Their growing client list includes celebrities like Sophia Loren, Giorgio Armani and Ferrari. "We love to welcome more Canadians to Piedmont," expressed Chef Carlo with a twinkle in his eye.

Click here (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFTXvaj-Y7c>) and discover Piedmont truffles and hazelnuts with Carlo Zarri. For more information on Villa San Carlo, log on to www.hotelsancarlo.it