



## Love of Chocolate Began with a Headache: International Chef Carlo Zarri

By Patricia D. Sherman

Carlo Zarri's first encounter with chocolate was painful. "I was almost four years old and with my cousin Bruno I ate a full jar of Nutella spread on bread. My aunt got crazy and we had headache for two days."

But Zarri recovered from his headache with his love of chocolate intact. More than three decades later, he is an internationally renowned chef with a reputation for promoting Italian regional cuisine and owner of the Villa San Carlo hotel and restaurant in the heart of the hilly southern Piedmont region known as the Langhe.



In the northwest corner of Italy bordering the Alps, Piedmont is famous for its wide variety of chocolate recipes, many of which feature hazelnuts, another famous local ingredient. Cortemilia, Zarri's hometown, is promoted as the world's hazelnut capital.

Zarri grew up surrounded by chocolate candies and sweets. Nutella, the famous chocolate and

hazelnut paste, is made in the village of Alba, 30 km from Cortemilia. Other regional specialties include Gianduiotti, a triangular chocolate candy mixed with hazelnuts, Hazelnut Cake with Chocolate Sauce ([recipe](#)), and Grandmother's Pudding ([recipe](#)), a creme caramel made with chocolate and hazelnuts, which Zarri's grandmother often prepared to celebrate special events.

Now, inspired by the flavors and produce of



his beloved Piedmont, Zarri uses chocolate and hazelnuts in savory as well as sweet recipes, like home made traditional noodles kneaded with chocolate and dressed with hazelnuts. “I normally use bitter chocolate from Jamaica or Nicaragua produced by Domori or Valrhona,” he says

The Zarris, an old Cortemilia family, have been in the hotel business for four generations. Carlo’s father founded the Villa San Carlo in 1981 and Carlo has been sole manager since 2000. Fluent in German, French and English, Zarri has a diploma in tourism and has studied in the U.S. and London. He has been a guest chef at the James Beard House in New York.

At Villa San Carlo, Zarri is a hands-on manager, leading a culinary team chosen from the region. He is also a qualified sommelier and a member of AIS and AMIRA. The San Carlo’s cellar has more than 1,000 wines, most from the Piedmont.

Influenced by international food trends, Zarri has focused his cuisine on quality rather than quantity. He chose not to do large banquets and reduced the size of his restaurant, concentrating on high quality food, prepared with great care. “I buy the very best ingredients directly from the farmers and use them simply in traditional recipes. If you have the best ingredients you can make a good plate, if you have bad ingredients it is very hard to cook something special,” he says.

Zarri has managed food and beverage at official Italian outlets at the Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, Athens, and Turin, at one point producing up to 11,000 meals a day from 17 kitchens.



He is much in demand as a chef for special events. For instance, he catered the wedding in Budapest of Carlo Ponti, Jr., son of screen icon Sophia Loren. Zarri transported all the ingredients to Hungary from the Langhe, including three trucks full of wine.

Zarri is author of *Piedmont Sensations: A journey through the Region’s Garden of Delights*, published in 2004 by Omega Edizioni [www.ediomega.com](http://www.ediomega.com)

Visit [www.hotelsancarlo.it](http://www.hotelsancarlo.it).

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