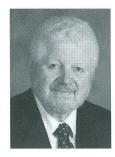
Dining Out

Truffle Dinner in Oxnard

By Robert A. Reid, M.D.



Ron and Beverlie Latimer and Patti and I share an unlikely culinary experience. We all have been to Cortemilia, Italy in the Piemonte region and savored

the gustatory delights of Carlo Zarri, the chef of Villa San Carlo, a small hotel which along with his family he owns and operates. The hotel is comfortable, clean and has been offered four stars but the Zarris refused them for "logistical reasons." The food is world class and Carlo has been the chef for the Italian Pavilions at the Torino, Salt Lake, and Vancouver Olympics. He also prepared the food for Sophia Loren's seventieth birthday celebration and wedding feast for her son.

In March of last year Carlo emailed us that he was coming to the west coast and would be cooking at a restaurant in Moorpark. We made the pilgrimage there on a dark and foggy night and were rewarded with a superb dinner in which Carlo personally shaved white truffles over our soup and risotto. In December 2010 he returned and offered a Tradizioni Piemontese Christmas menu featuring black truffles whose season just ended with the first snowfall in Piemonte. The venue was the elegant Topa Club, atop the Topa tower which is the larger of the two tall buildings rising near the Esplanade Shopping Center between Ventura and Oxnard.

As we were getting seated, Carlo, who is quite humble and charming came out of the kitchen with hugs and kisses on the cheeks and showed a plateful of the precious truffles that he would be using in the evening's dinner. We ordered a bottle of Villa Antinori Chianti from the very short Topa Club wine list and it was perfect with the meal. We began with Insaltine della contadine con

filettini di galleto, Fontine e uova servita su misticanze all'aceto balsamic (Farmer's salad with chicken filets, fontina cheese, and eggs, served on a bed of lettuce with balsamic vinegar). These were small-plate portions appropriate for a six-course dinner and had a wonderfully subtle combination of tastes and textures. Next came the featured truffle course, Terrina di piselli in crosta, cotta nel forno con scaglie di tartufo Piemontese (Green pea soup baked in the oven with a crispy hat and truffle flakes). The waiters brought the soup and Carlo immediately followed, shaving a generous portion of truffles into each bowl. We four agreed that we would be completely satisfied with no need to go further after a bowl or two more of this soup. The intensely fresh tasting green pea puree was the perfect backdrop for the elegant truffles. There was much more to come, however.

The Italians have made an art form out of preparing rice. The next course was Risotto Arborio mantecata all langarola con funghi porcini trifulati (Arborio rice from Italy, roasted Langarlo style, prepared with porcini mushrooms in garlic and parsley). The risotto turned out to be canaroli as preferred in Italy, and was al dente yet creamy and oh so delicious. The menu suggested that the main course would be Filetto di vitello in crosta servito con la salsa di Barolo ristretto alla "Sophia Loren." We were looking forward to a veal filet topped with the famous sauce served at the legendary movie star's birthday. The translation, however, read "Beef sirloin baked in the oven with a reduced Barolo wine sauce Sophia Loren style." What was served was a superbly tender filet mignon with the savory sauce that contained not only the wine reduction but a very flavorful puree of vegetables as well. Also on the plate was a pyramid of Spumone di patate agli spinaci con semi di finocchio e pomodorini (Poached potatoes with spinach and cherry tomatoes). Excellent!

Cortemilia and its environs not only produce truffles but are famous for hazelnuts. Carlo often serves pasta with a hazelnut sauce at his hotel but in this case the hazelnuts were saved for dessert. We enjoyed Panna cotta Piemontese al caffe servita con piccolo stuzzicherie di nocciole (Traditional panna cotta with coffee served with hazelnut petit fours). As we enjoyed our coffee and espresso we munched on hazelnuts covered with sugar as we did when we were in Carlo's establishment. We bid a fond farewell to Carlo and began to immediately scheme as to how we might get him to come to Santa Barbara next year and regale us with another Piemontese culinary experience.

For more information, the Web site for Carlo's hotel is www.hotelsancarlo.it



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