

S t o r y l i n e s

A Taste of Trentino

In Trentino, food is never far from mind: forget the stodgy fare served in most European alpine resorts, this is authentic, heartfelt home cooking. The hearty yet refined local cuisine has Italian and German influences. Peasant-style dishes with a Tyrolean twist include steaming polenta, hearty pork and beef dishes, not to mention dumplings, salmon trout, smoked meats and risotto made with mushrooms or apple.

Trentino also produces excellent wines, most of which never find their way into British shops because the locals appreciate them too much at home. The greatest red wines are Marzemino, Mozart's favourite tippel, and full-bodied Teroldego, whose name supposedly derives from "Tyrolean gold". There are also richly ripe white wines and sparkling fizz that often surpasses French Champagne.

Certain dishes, like the notorious "strangled priests" are deeply linked to Trentino's chequered history. The Counter-Reformation (1545-1563) marked the fight-back of the Catholic church and its attempt to recapture Protestant souls. Curiously, it also marked the creation of *strangolapreti*, the local dish known as "strangled priests". In the eyes of the common people, the bishops and priests of the time were renowned for their greed and high living, leaving the masses to content themselves with such staples as filling *gnocchi*, created with ingredients available to the poorest peasant. Based on an inexpensive recipe and ingredients, this simple dish of "strangled priests" became a curse on all the priests who ignored the common people! The dish is essentially *gnocchi*, made with spinach and potatoes or bread, and boiled before being coated in butter and cheese.

Natural ingredients

Trentino is a major apple producer, with two thirds of the apples coming from the Val di Non area. Golden Delicious and the Canadian Rennet are the two most common varieties but Trentino also produces native apples: the Melinda, only cultivated in the Val di Non, and La Trentina, grown over a wider area in the Adige valley. Forest fruits are also tasty, especially raspberries and strawberries, while around Lake Garda, where the climate is milder, apricots, plums and olives are successfully cultivated. Cherries are produced around Lake Pergine while pears are widely grown everywhere. Honey, salami, olive oil and especially mushrooms represent other local passions. (► *Request 25 Strange Things You Didn't Know about Trentino*). The region also has high-quality dairy produce, with cheeses like ricotta still made in traditional ways in isolated alpine dairy farms known as *malghe*. More industrially produced cheeses include Grana Trentino, the local version of Parmesan, and mild Asiago and Taleggio. The cattle are mainly Rendena, a Swiss breed introduced in Trentino in 1712, and since found to thrive in a similar alpine climate. Some of the dairy farms (*malghe*) can be visited and offer displays of cheese-making. ► *For further details, request the If in Trentino in Summer brochure.*

Seasonal Food

Food and wine is one of Trentino's strongest suits, whatever the season. The *Sounds of the Dolomites* summer festival involves open-air concerts in the mountains, followed by tasty fare in idyllic alpine refuges. Summer also sees the start of *Vinum Bonum*, an atmospheric long festival of wine and music, with concerts held in wine cellars and castles. The festival is linked to food-tasting events, from fruits of the forest to alpine cheeses, honey, salami and wine. Throughout the year, there are food-tasting sessions, sometimes in conjunction with *Slow Food*, an anti-fast food organisation trying to promote a return to genuine home cooking and traditional recipes. ► *For further details of summer festivals, request the **If in Trentino in Summer** brochure and check the Trentino website: www.trentino.to.* Winter food is obviously far more filling, with many of the best-known dishes dating back centuries, whether linked to Trentino's Austrian past, or foods connected with the region's ethnic communities. Such traditional dishes include polenta, *canederli* (a type of gnocchi) and *smacafam*, carnival fare made with smoked bacon. For dessert, tradition calls for apple *strudel*, as well as a fruit-studded *zelten* Christmas cake and crunchy biscuits for dousing in *Vino Santo*. (*Many of these dishes are featured on the Trentino website, and come complete with recipes*).

Food Festivals

There are food and wine festivals throughout the year, including gastronomic walks, wine-tasting and grape festivals. Riva del Garda's *BITEG*, held in May, a food and wine fair that attracts international media interest. The spring *Sapori in Locali* festival in Valsugana promotes such local delicacies as salami, sausage, horsemeat, honey and asparagus. Also in spring, the Valle dei Laghi area opens its wine cellars to the public to show how *Vino Santo* is made, and organises a long gastronomic walk involving the scoffing of different courses at staging posts along the route. In Trento, the first Sunday of Lent is given over to *La Casolara*, a cheese festival, a reminder that good Christians should abstain from meat in Lent. In May, *Cantine Aperte* sees the opening of all regional wine estates to the public, and is linked to local wine-tasting festivals. In June, the cherry and forest fruits festival is an opportunity for fruity fun in the Valsugana area, a mood that is repeated in later apple, cherry and chestnut festivals. Early autumn means the grape harvest, celebrated with walks, fairs and wine-tasting events. September sees the start of the *Traubenkur*, a curious grape cure once favoured by the aristocracy of Mitteleuropa. Late autumn also means the Trento polenta festival and the Roncegno chestnut festivals, with a spicy Christmas food market held in Rovereto. Definitely food for thought.

Food & Wine Holidays

Trentino now promotes food and wine holidays, with everything from organised tastings to wine tours and cookery courses led by top chefs in lovely locations. On a smaller, more intimate scale, there are mountain-top demonstrations on how to prepare polenta or to pick mushrooms, and cook them creatively. Food markets throughout the year provide a celebration of local produce, from salmon trout and sausages to cherries and chestnuts,

not to mention the lethal herb-flavoured *grappas*. ► *For further details of food and wine festivals and holidays, request the **Summer Holiday Offers** brochure and check the Trentino website: www.trentino.to*

Trentino Wines

Nor do the local vineyards disappoint, with a full-bodied red Teroldego or a light Pinot Grigio providing a safer alternative to *grappa*, the deceptively lethal local firewater. Teroldego, the prince of Trentino wines, is grown on the Piana Rotaliana near Rovereto, and has a violet and raspberry bouquet. Alessandro Fusi of Ca'Vit, a major producer, claims that, “ It is the deep, ground-rich substances deposited by the Noce river that give the grapes their character.” The rival red, fruity, full-bodied Marzemino, may have been Mozart's chosen wine but who knows what he made of *grappa* flavoured with herbs or fruits of the forest.

The white wines tend to be crisp, pure fruited, restrained and often highly aromatic, and, in the case of Pinot Grigio, with hints of pears or nuts. Trentino (Traminer) Aromatico is a dry white with an intense aroma while, at the other end of the scale, Vino Santo is an amber-coloured dessert wine in the same family as the Tuscan Vin Santo. Versatile Trentino Spumante comes as Brut, Riserva, Secco, Semi-Secco or Sweet. It was a Trentino-based wine-producer, Giulio Ferrari, who launched Champagne-method wines in Italy at the turn of the 20th century. He planted Chardonnay vines in the belief that Trentino's climate and soil could beat the French at their own game. Try some Trentino Spumante and see if you agree if the future is sparkling for Trentino wines. Given the heady alpine air and rugged mountain trails, you may have room for alpine cheeses, almond tart or apple strudel.