

Hogtown HomeGrown

Volume 5 Issue 11

November 2010

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The trip of a lifetime—a foodie in Italia

12,000 miles traveled on 5 planes, 8 trains, 20 taxis, 4 buses, 2 electric trams, 7 vaporetos, 1 gondola and 4 very tired feet (foot travel accounts for about 100 miles.)

Over 46 meals eaten—18 hotel breakfasts in 5 different hotels (one packed “to go” for the plane ride home.) Most were rolls with butter, cheese or hard-boiled eggs, creamy yogurt, fruit, pastries, plus strong coffee with hot milk or a cappuccino or two.

At least 10 lunches on the run or on the rails—usually bread and cheese, plus whatever fruit and veggies we found at the markets. One tourist-mistake lunch—on the piazza in front of the Pantheon—the food was good, the waiter rude, the prices high, but I didn’t care, we were in Italy—I had a Caprese Salad and Lemon Pasta! One lunch we made with our own hands during a cooking class in Rome with Andrea Consoli—Soup with Pumpkin and Black Cabbage, Gnocchi with Fresh Tomato Sauce, and Tiramisu—and yes, this issue contains the recipes!

Our dinners ran the gamut from more bread and cheese, to the ever-present gelato, to a magnificent thin pizza with porcini mushrooms and a dark red draft Italian beer. There are no bad meals in Italy! And then there were our three “high-end” dining experiences—these are meals we will be talking about for years.

Ristorante Nabucco in Milan was small and located in the “artsy” section of town—a short walk from our hotel. Our waiter was wonderful, but the food was even better—the highlights were a zucchini blossom appetizer, a squid-ink pasta, and my first polenta with white truffles (I know my pictures don't do it justice!) We even got to sample an herbal (but very alcoholic) after-dinner drink made in Sicily—Averna.

L’Osteria di Santa Marina was in Venice—also just a short walk from our hotel, but don’t believe anyone who says you can’t get lost in Venice! We had the luxury of several waiters and our very first tasting menu—all based on seafood and veggies. One small delight after another—squid over polenta, sea bass ravioli in broth with tiny mussels, smoky sweet octopus—seven courses in all—ending with individual warm chocolate soufflés served with a splash of zabaglione and a tiny scoop of pomegranate sorbet. A romantic walk back to our hotel over the famed Rialto Bridge finished the evening in style.

Tucked away in a Florence warehouse district, Fuor d’acqua was all seafood again, but this time we were able to taste a variety of fresh fish and shellfish served both cold and warm. Traditionalists in Italy serve at least one seafood appetizer raw—or as our waiter Davida described it, “Italian sushi”, with just a little olive oil, salt, pepper and maybe a drop of lemon juice. I never knew raw langostinos were so sweet! Paired with a wonderful wine, we worked our way through the platter of seven types of raw fish, then four warm appetizers before the main course of red snapper, surrounded by pieces of potato and other veggies. An extraordinary meal for our last night in Italia.



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What's Fresh Right Now?

Arugula
Basil—italian, microgreens
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Chestnuts
Collards
Cucumbers—slicers, kirby, mini seedless
Eggplant—purple italian, purple asian,
multi-colored small
Garlic—elephant
Greens—collards, mustards, turnips
Herbs—basil, rosemary, lime leaf
Honey
Melon—bitter
Microgreens—basil, arugula, radish, cress
Mushrooms—shitake
Onions—green, dry yellow
Papaya—green
Peas—white acre
Peppers—green/red sweet bell, poblano
Persimmons—astrigent, non-astrigent
Potatoes—white, red, sweet
Pumpkins—calabasa, seminole
Radish—microgreens, white
Roselles
Shoots—pea, corn, sunflower
Spinach—malabar (asian)
Squash—yellow/summer, butternut,
zucchini, calabasa, seminole
Sprouts—alfalfa, clover, quinoa, wheat,
adzuki, garbanzo, mung bean,
french lentil, green lentil, radish
Sweet Potatoes
Tomatoes—red beefsteak, grape, cherry,
large plum

There are apples available at the markets from Hendersonville, NC and Ellijay, GA. Although they are brought in from outside North Central Florida, it is a good chance to get some very fresh apples. Varieties available have included Golden Delicious, Granny Smith, Rome and Stayman.

Local and Fresh— Tuscan Kale

We took a cooking class in Rome and when our chef, Andrea Consoli, introduced the menu, he apologized because we would not be able to find one of the ingredients when we came back to the States. The ingredient in question—cavolo nero or black cabbage—sounded very mysterious, until I saw it! It was kale, specifically a variety we call Tuscan Kale, also known as Dinosaur Kale. Because our temperatures are similar to Rome's Lazio region, we grow it here in North Central Florida too!

A very versatile member of the cabbage family, kale is a nutritious and delicious addition to your kitchen. Remove large ribs before cooking or just chop and cook the smaller ones. Store wrapped in the refrigerator for up to one week.

Autumn Soup with Pumpkin and Kale

INGREDIENTS

2 Tablespoons unsalted butter
2 leeks, sliced
6 medium russet potatoes, peeled and diced
herbs—rosemary, bay, juniper berries, sage
2 cups pumpkin, peeled and diced
1 cup organic whole milk
Coarse salt to taste
1 bunch Tuscan kale, ribbed and chopped

DIRECTIONS

Melt butter in a large saucepan over low heat, stir in leeks, cover and cook until soft.

Add potatoes and enough water to cover—about three cups. Bring to a boil.

Tie herbs in cheesecloth or use a tea infuser. Submerge herbs in water with potatoes and leeks. Cook covered for 20 minutes.

Add pumpkin and cook covered for another 20 minutes. Remove herbs and blend or mash part of the soup to thicken it. Add milk. Cook another 10 minutes, then turn off heat. Taste for salt and stir in kale. Cover and let sit for 10 minutes before serving.

Gnocchi

INGREDIENTS

2 pounds russet potatoes
1 egg yolk
1/4 teaspoon salt
2 cups all purpose flour, sifted before measuring
2 cups fine cornmeal

DIRECTIONS

Boil potatoes with skins on until completely cooked through. Remove from water, allow to cool, peel, then mash until completely smooth. For best results, place mashed potatoes in a colander, cover and refrigerate overnight to allow any excess water to drain.

Mix egg and salt into mashed potatoes, then turn mixture onto a floured surface and start to work in the flour by hand—you may not need all two cups of flour. Knead until the dough is smooth and can be easily hand-rolled into ropes or snakes about 3/4 - 1 inch thick.

Place cornmeal in a large roasting pan. Roll dough into ropes and cut into 1 inch pieces. Shape each individual piece by rolling on a wooden gnocchi board or over the tines of a fork. Drop each shaped gnocchi into the cornmeal and toss to coat completely. Repeat until all dough is used.

Fill a large pot with 6 quarts of water and bring to a boil. Using your hands or a mesh strainer, remove gnocchi from cornmeal and shake lightly to remove any excess cornmeal. When water has come to a boil, add salt to taste. Place gnocchi in water and boil for 3-5 minutes, until gnocchi float on the surface. Remove from water—a strainer works best for this, using a colander squishes the individual pieces. Serve immediately with your favorite sauce.

Fresh Tomato Sauce

INGREDIENTS

2 pounds ripe plum tomatoes, preferably San Marzano variety
1/4 cup olive oil
1 clove garlic, unpeeled
salt to taste
8-10 leaves fresh basil

DIRECTIONS

Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Cut a small X in the stem end of each tomato. Place tomatoes in water, return to boil and remove. Allow to cool, then peel. Finely dice tomatoes and set aside, retaining as much of the juices as possible.

Add oil to a large skillet and place over medium heat. Add unpeeled garlic clove and heat until a light golden brown. Remove from oil. Add tomatoes with their juices to the hot oil and cook about 10 minutes, until softened. Peel garlic and add to tomatoes. Taste for salt.

Just before serving, tear basil leaves and stir into sauce. For best results, add freshly

Tricks and Tips

Gnocchi was one of those dishes I never got right. I used the wrong kind of potatoes and cooked them the wrong way.

Waxy potatoes won't work—too much moisture—be sure to use Russet potatoes.

Since water is the enemy of successful gnocchi, potatoes must be cooked whole and drained well.

Letting the mashed potatoes drain overnight ensures perfect, light gnocchi.

Tricks and Tips

Sometimes tomatoes just aren't at their peak. You could make a traditional marinara sauce, but it is a little heavy for light, tender gnocchi.

Try the following topping instead—

Truffle Butter

Melt 4 Tablespoons (1/2 stick) very fresh, unsalted butter over low heat. Mix in one or more teaspoons of white truffle paste. Add boiled gnocchi to pan and stir until completely coated. Serve hot and, if you have a truffle, top with a slice or two.



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Tricks and Tips

Our teacher, Chef Andrea Consoli, was insistent that authentic tiramisu has no alcohol in either the dipping liquid or the custard mixture.

He explained that since it is a raw egg mixture (similar to a zabaglione) many restaurants will add liquor in order to extend its shelf life.

Make it today, serve it tomorrow and forget the alcohol!

Tiramisu

INGREDIENTS

4 eggs

4 Tablespoons powdered or confectioners' sugar (4X not 10X)

A pinch of salt

250 grams or 8-10 ounces marscapone cheese

Ladyfingers or savoiardi biscuits, enough for two layers in your pan, trim to fit evenly

2 cups espresso coffee, cooled (not instant)

2 ounces chocolate, cut into small pieces (optional)

1/4-1/2 cup unsweetened cocoa powder (optional decoration for top of tiramisu)

DIRECTIONS

Separate eggs, set yolks aside. Beat egg whites with 2 Tablespoons confectioners' sugar and a pinch of salt until stiff glossy peaks form. Set aside.

Beat egg yolks with remaining sugar for 5-10 minutes, until lemon colored and thick. Add the marscapone cheese and stir well with a wooden spoon until completely incorporated.

Dip ladyfingers into the espresso quickly on one side only. Place one layer of dipped ladyfingers into a long flat serving dish, dipped side up. Sprinkle with chocolate if desired.

Gently fold beaten egg whites into egg yolk-marscapone mixture. Spread half the mixture over the dipped ladyfingers. Add another layer of dipped ladyfingers. Top with the remaining egg mixture. Dust with cocoa if desired. Refrigerate at least two hours before serving.