

A Taste of Italy

by Kate Mulligan (formerly Kate Amundsen for American Airlines Onboard Magazine)

A crisp afternoon hike through the fragrant countryside on the outskirts of Siena leaves me breathless as I catch the last warmth from the lingering sun. It too rests against the ancient wall of this incredible capital of Tuscany. I'm stunned by the surrounding sights, carefully cultivated landscapes with cypress shrouded hills and picturesque villages.

Still, my appetite for everything else is shadowed by memories of yesterday's Panne al Pomodoro (a tomato and bread soup) as memories of it's steamy bouquet caused a stir in my appetite once again.

The passions pervading this culture are well known, even for those who have only dreamed of touring here. Everyone knows that 'Gastronomic Italy' is a redundant term. For as well as the tongue, there is food for the eye, ear, mind, heart and certainly the soul. The cuisine of Italy is truly a reflection and culmination of all it's talents.

Past the chapel and monastery of Saint Catherine, (the patron saint of Siena) and following around the narrow cobblestone alley down and under several arches stretching skyward against this hillside maze, I continue the quest for my evening meal, sadly the last of this fabulous gastronomic journey.

There is no sign on the door. Only a casual line of patrons waiting outside prevents me from missing it altogether. There are no sauces listed on the menu here. Since it is the task of the Tuscan chef to reveal rather than mask the subtle flavors of the seasonal ingredients, we enter with faith renewed by the kitchen's emanations, which never fail to disappoint.

Once inside I warm myself with a glass of local Chianti and thoughts of the view of the Cathedral framed by the pastel walls of my hotel room and my traveling companions as they head off to yet another destination.

The Antipasti (subhead)

I'm left alone to elaborate on our travels together, the delight in discovery punctuated by a variety of mouth watering meals offered generously by this incredibly talented culture, which respects the season's agricultural calendar, and provides a purely common sense approach to the science of good eating. Buffet tables laden with beautifully presented Antipasti della Casa in Rome; a veritable cornucopia of tasty morsels; rosemary herb roasted peppers, white beans in garlic and olive oil, steamed artichoke hearts bathed in a mild vinaigrette, mussels in wine sauce...the list is endless.

Lucky for the hearty Italian appetite, this first course does not overwhelm. However, in the case of a 'When in Rome' traveler, it may be best not to do what the Romans do – and push back from the table because more enjoyment will surely arrive in the courses that follow.

Risotto & Polenta (subhead)

Simple ingredients uniquely formed and combined with fresh local herbs mark my memories of two of Italy's northernmost regions; Veneto and Val d' Aosta, where rice and corn are the mothers of invention in the never ending evolution of edible creations made with risotto and polenta.

Veneto is famous for many dishes, but for me, Risi e Bisi, the honorary dish served on the Feast of St Marks (patron saint of Venice) , is a colorful example of their gastronomic flair. More soup-like in construction than most risotto concoctions, this dish of rice and peas, Pancette, (Italian salt-cured bacon), parsley and Parmesan cheese has a sedating effect on even the most ravenous of appetites.

There are probably as many risotto recipes as there are cooks in Italy. Some other favorites are Risotto al Finocchii, made with fennel, Risotto al Nero di Seppie, a seafood risotto made with cuttlefish ink, and Risotto alla Milanese, a dish made with saffron – known as the gold of Milan.

Polenta is another typically northern primi (first course) made from ground cornmeal, it has provided a staple of meals throughout the ages; made with milk as a baby's first solid food, add sugar to that for a simple dessert, slice and fry it to accompany meals, or layered as in Polenta Pasticciata. An ancient recipe from Val d'Aosta; Polenta Concia, is still popular today where layers are alternated with Gruyere or Fontina cheese, and served with shaved truffles on top. Simple yet elegant, a strategy in Italian kitchens emulated across the globe.

Communal Dining (subhead)

The communal table where I sit tonight, is now starting to fill up with locals. Many speak only Italian, but food, and laughter are common bonds. I raise my glass and am reminded of the Val d'Aosta's "grolla" a baroque style lidded chalice of wine passed around the table for all to share (symbolizing the cup passed at Christ's Last Supper) and in my mind a form of grace that typifies the quest of Italians to integrate art and history with the everyday dining experience.

As I review the manu that is written by hand on place-mat sized parchment, I'm inspired by my neighbor's appetizer – and feast on Crostini di Fegatini (chicken liver croutons). These arrive with diced tomatos, basil and a fragrant extra virgin olive oil, surrounded by paper thin slices of proscuitto and and finocchiona (a fennel flavored salami).

Pasta is the King (subhead)

Between courses, my mind roams with my nose to the kitchen, and where we are now well into the the subject of first courses – Pasta reigns as King. Maccheroni, rigatoni, fussilli, lasagna, oreccitte, vermacelli, tagliatelle, buscantini, spagetti, caneloni, any way you shape it, stuff it , or sauce it, the names alone are enough to conjure up sweet aromas of Italian 'home made' .

My own favorites include Puglia's Penne con I Broccoli, a dish of tube shaped pasta and the freshes flowerettes of broccoli, enhanced with garlic, olive oil and the subtle underpinnings of onion, anchovy, pine nut and pepper. And the

Orcchiette con Cimi di Rapey, an ear shaped pasta served with turnip, beet or Swiss chard greens is another I find brings pure satisfaction. Lastly, let's not forget the incredibly popular Fresh tomato sauce with basil and Pecorino (a golden, black-cruled sheep's milk cheese) that originated in the south of Italy – now a favorite worldwide.

Eating Through Italy (subhead)

While immersed in that toast to my homeland, I'm pleasantly interrupted by the introduction of my entree; Bistecca alla Fiorentina; a tender T-bone dressed in extra virgin olive oil with a touch of fresh pressed garlic, and cracked pepper.

Like every other day, it's the best entree I've eaten, despite the other wonderful variations, like Perugia's Dal mi'Collo's mixed grill of lamb, duck, rabbit and port, and even Signoria Ricci's in Orvieto, where the inspiring Bracirole alla Pizzaiola, (steaks with tomato, garlic and oregano sauce) had a melt in your mouth quality. Hmmm, what about the veal slices Sorrento style that I savored last week in Palermo, served with a marinated zucchini, or that sun soaked cafe where the frito misto included a view of the Amalfi coast and the scent of the sea.

Maybe it is just my appetite tonight, but as I sit back and savor this evenings company of pleasures, I have to admit there is nothing quite like dining one's way through Italy.

I pay my respects and the bill while the dolci; gelatos tortas spumette di Niccole, Montebianco and Tiramisu and almond cookies begin their descent. Yes, i will let all that tempt me – but tomorrow.

Kate Mulligan