

Forks in the Road

Peter Kaminsky, 09.11.09, 09:30 AM EDT
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Two small villages in the Italian Dolomites are the unlikely center of a Michelin-starred gastronomic excellence.



Tucked away in the far northeast of Italy near Cortina d'Ampezzo, in the shadow of the Dolomite Alps, are two tiny neighboring villages, San Cassiano and Corvara in Badia, where you should go for dinner--make that *three* dinners. There is a trio of worth-a-journey restaurants here that have four Michelin stars among them. That comes to one star for every 475 inhabitants--the villages' combined population is about 1,900. To put this in perspective, in Paris (pop. 2,203,800) gourmets share each of their 99 Michelin stars with 22, 260 of their fellow citizens.

The Michelin largesse is remarkable because it is the Arcadian landscape of Alta Badia, as the region is called, rather than its food that originally lured travelers here. The local produce isn't anything to write home about (as is the case in many mountain areas with short growing seasons), and although the region's traditional table fare is great, you could throw a dart at a map of Italy and say the same about almost any place you hit. But you wouldn't find glacier-topped peaks descending into ivory cliffs that turn flaming pink with alpenglow at sunset. On the mountains' plunging shoulders, pine forests and hand-mown meadows offer a hiker's Nirvana in summer and superb ski runs in winter: George Clooney, Tom Cruise, Olympic ski champion Alberto Tomba, and Prince Albert of Monaco have come here for years to ski and socialize.

Alta Badia's gastronomic status is the work of a few visionaries who realized that their well-heeled clientele, arriving here after negotiating a hundred miles of vertiginous switchback roads, were a captive culinary audience. In 1995 hotelier and wine enthusiast Stefan Wieser garnered the first Michelin star at La Siriola in San Cassiano. Then Wieser's genteel, cosmopolitan cousin, Hugo Pizzinini, who had studied at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration, prevailed upon his father to take their family's hotel, Rosa Alpina, also in San Cassiano, down the same path. "At that time we were offering pizza and a good but not ambitious set menu," Pizzinini recalled. "My aunt and uncle had this very talented and inventive young chef working for them when they retired, Norbert Niederkofler. Norbert was born with a gift for cuisine, and he was eager to learn more. So while we upgraded the hotel we sent him to see the world and work with great chefs."

Cut to 2000 and Hotel Rosa Alpina is a member of Relais & Châteaux, and the Pizzinini-Niederkofler team has won two Michelin stars for their hotel restaurant, St. Hubertus. Chef Niederkofler presents a very personal and modern cuisine in these charming dining rooms, which are decked out in full Hapsburg hunting Monty: The staff wear green flannel waiter's uniforms and the walls are studded with chamois antlers. Apart from the susurrus of table talk and the occasional clink of silver on china, the loudest sound is the comforting muffled thump of a serving platter or a bottle of wine swaddled in layers of white linen being set down on a side table.

Niederkofler's signature dish is an intensely flavorful filet mignon cooked in a casing of hay, which lends an herbaceous succulence to the beef. Another greatest hit is a juicy spice-dusted guinea fowl breast atop pine-needle risotto that tastes bracingly fresh. For the same meal in which he serves those refined but regionally rustic creations, he also prepares a very modern carrot-and-lemongrass soup with shrimp done *a la plancha*, and a first course of pickled arctic char with bottarga dressed with grapefruit vinaigrette. The latter is eclectic, bright, and delicious. From the dessert flight, I adore a sweet yet wonderfully tangy apple sorbet made to look just like a slice of green apple.

The next morning begins with breakfast at Rosa Alpina, where, *mirabile dictu*, I revel in a perfect kaiser roll with fresh sweet cream butter. Despite years of searching I have not come across the real thing since early childhood in my grandparents' grocery store in Kearny, New Jersey. Farm-fresh eggs with deep-orange yolks and pan-crisped speck are the ideal foils for the sublime roll. Okay, several rolls.

To ready ourselves for the evening's Michelin stop at La Siriola, we set out on a three-hour jaunt, mostly uphill, to the little church of Santa Croce. It is early September. The fields and meadows are the deepest green you can imagine. As in a Breughel canvas, the mowers are in the fields cutting hay with long scythes. Below them stand elegant church spires, slender and delicate as the fingers of a violinist, and, along our route, cute Alpine chalets of the type that have inspired generations of cuckoo-clock makers. Flowers cascade out of every window box. As we climb higher all we hear is the lowing of cattle, the clinking of cowbells, and the buzzing of bees hovering among the

wildflowers--most noticeably among the edelweiss, which are in full bloom. (And yes, I do think of Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*.)

Where St. Hubertus is classic haute-Alpine in decor, La Siriola is more casual. (The name means "the nightingale" in the regional tongue, Ladin, which Alta Badia natives, with patriotic unanimity, assert is the purest descendant of Latin.) The colorful dining nooks and solid, plaid, and check wall coverings proclaim a whimsical spirit that extends to the display of snow globes. Chef Claudio Melis, who brings to mind Johnny Depp in Jack Sparrow mode, began his Michelin ascent as a pizza slinger on Sardinia, and along the way placed himself under the tutelage of Gualtiero Marchesi, Italy's first three-star chef.

Our dinner starts with an amuse-bouche of celery consommé that wakes up my taste buds the way a splash of aftershave brings a tingle to the cheek. There follows a beguiling fennel cream with salmon roe that pops on the palate. Spaghetti made of kamut flour (a nutty-flavored wheat), served with carrot-and-orange oil, browned and lightly salted cod, and beets, picks up on the same theme of citrus and fish that Niederkofler had played with in his arctic char the night before. Having written a book about pork, I am delighted to dig into a rich, crisped suckling pig with a sharp counterpoint of almond crust and a beer gelée. A salad of field greens and wildflowers is as pretty as a bride's bouquet and comes with a noncloying raspberry vinaigrette, which I had thought impossible.

The next day, Pizzinini suggests that we take a pre-dinner hike in Fanes Nature Park, "one of the most beautiful places on earth." He is not exaggerating. Fanes is as grand and picturesque as a wild corner of Yosemite. No roads, no vehicles; a long ascent to a high valley; rushing streams; hundred-mile views of glaciers in the distance; and intersecting valleys drawing the eye to misty green vanishing points. Groups of cows and horses graze on sweet summer grass, and off to the side, marmots perch on sunny rocks. These fuzzy squirrel-like creatures, whose whistles and whoops sound like yodeling, figure prominently in stories of the mythical kingdom of Fanes and of a queen who was raised by marmots, spoke their language, and could even turn into one. Thoughts of fairy queens and magic turn out to be the perfect prelude to our visit to the third Michelin-star restaurant, Stüa di Michil, which I can describe only as gloriously nuts. Right after the soup course, a flat-screen TV hanging from the wood-beamed ceiling lights up to give diners a view of the kitchen, where, in step with a melody from *The Magic Flute*, the staff don baseball hats and miner's headlights and put on a cooking demo--cum--laser light show.

The chef, Arturo Spicocchi, is a native of Le Marche, a province on the central Adriatic coast of Italy that has a cuisine I love for its rustic simplicity. He has spent time in the kitchens of Ferrán Adrià's apostles, but Spicocchi's style eschews the chemistry-set cutesiness of Adrià's molecular pyrotechnics. (Well, almost: An early course presented as an homage to the potato included a Jerusalem artichoke shaped like a potato and a dark meringue meant to simulate the cinders in which one would roast it in the fireplace.)

Not to be outdone by La Siriola in the wildflower department, the chef starts us off with a cold tomato soup garnished with tiny blossoms. An intensely savory, slightly sweet Parmesan ice cream is followed by a shrimp beignet with roasted-bell-pepper coulis. (We are advised that the shrimp were caught in the lagoons of Venice that very day.) A caper foam enlivens trout, a noble but rarely inspiringly presented fish, and in the stick-to-your-ribs department, we tuck into smoked suckling pig with summer truffles.

It's a memorable meal but is surpassed by our after-dinner stroll through the psychedelic wine cellar designed by the proprietor, Michil Costa. "Mahatma Wine," he calls it because he admires Gandhi and it is, after all, his cellar, so there. The tour starts with guests being asked to put on rose-colored glasses as they enter a room dedicated to Champagne, then on through a warren of rooms celebrating various great wines, each with musical accompaniment. But instead of treacly renditions of Vivaldi and Mozart, the Burgundies have Frank Zappa singing "Bobby Brown" ("I'm a handsome son of a bitch") and the Bordeaux feature a more than usually tipsy Tom Waits. The diversion ends in a brilliantly lit "Temple of Sassicaia" (new-agey orchestral), complete with a casket in which reposes a bottle from the first vintage of this landmark Italian wine.

After three days I still can't apprehend how so much culinary talent came here any more than one can tell why a meteor lands in a particular spot on earth. Perhaps the answer lies elsewhere, in the same magical realm that brought the legends of sorcerers and fairy princesses to this land beneath the white mountains that glow as red as embers each day...at just about cocktail hour.

The Restaurants

St. Hubertus at Hotel Rosa Alpina

Strada Micura de Rü 20 San Cassiano 39-0471-849500 www.rosalpina.it Annual closing: April to mid-June, October, and November **Hotel rates: \$572--\$1,715**

La Siriola at Hotel Ciasa Salares

Prè de Vi Strasse 31

San Cassiano

39-0471-849445 www.siriolagroup.it

Annual closing: After Easter to mid-June; October to December 4

Hotel rates: \$274--\$497

Stüa di Michil at Hotel La Perla

Strada Col Alt 105

Corvara in Badia

39-0471-831000 www.hotel-laperla.it

Annual closing: April to mid-June; end of September to December

Hotel rates: \$629--\$915

One More Bite

Don't pass up an end-of-hike treat on the sun terrace of the Rifugio Santa Croce, next to the church in San Cassiano. Whatever else you order, try the Kaiserschmarrn, a butter-crisped, super-eggy pancake with a mountain-berry compote that is, as its name suggests, fit for an emperor. If they ever get around to awarding Michelin stars for down-home funkiness, this place would be on my short list.