



TREN

ITALY'S Best Kept Secret

BY ELIZABETH BLAND

PHOTOS BY SCOTT PETERSEN

TRENTINO

The small, butterfly-shaped province of Trentino in northeastern Italy is fast becoming a destination for travelers.

Some visit for the Dolomite Mountain ski slopes in the north; some seek out the sun-drenched coasts of Lake Garda in the south; still others make the trek entirely for the area's unique food and drink.

With three languages—Italian, German and an obscure

Rhaeto-Romance language called Ladin—on the tongues of these northeastern Italians, Trentino is a treasure trove of culinary and linguistic customs. Although Ladin speakers are the minority group, their language still appears on street signs alongside the dominant Italian and German.

Trentino is the lower province of the combined region known as Trentino-Alto Adige. Trentino and Alto Adige may

share a trilingual tradition, but they differ in both culture and climate. The weather in Alto Adige is dominated by the Alpine chill of the Dolomites, while Trentino's climate is tempered by the Mediterranean breezes swirling in from the plains to warm the coasts of Lake Garda.

Its striking landscape frames a terroir unmatched by other European regions. This "essence of land" includes magical minerals that give the local wine its nuance, herbs and flowers that nourish local cheeses and meats, and warm days and cool nights that bring fruits to balanced ripeness.

However, the sensory experiences beyond the palate are often overlooked; Trentino cuisine is a lure in and of itself, and modern pastimes draw the epicurean into a dimension where food, sports and festivals collide.

The region's varied landscape invites vigorous play and hearty eating. In the wintertime, skiers are welcomed at the bottom of the slopes with flaming grappa cocktails or steaming plates of cheesy polenta. In warmer months, hikers and mountain bikers stop along the roadsides to relish the juicy apples and berries that have elevated Trentino to an almost Garden-of-Eden status. Freshly cut mountain cheeses and slabs of speck, a regional naturally cured and smoked ham, are never far out of reach.

Thanks to its alluring variety, Trentino cuisine is gaining popularity among tourists and those in the specialty-food industry. American consumers are becoming accustomed to seeing distinctive Italian products on retail shelves and now want to repeat their Trentino dining experiences at home. The residents of Trentino are responding to this new-found interest by promoting the once-hidden jewels of their countryside, including the region's renowned cheeses.

Today, foreign markets represent nearly one third of total revenues for this province. Stefan Ties is a marketing consultant for Trentino Export, an association of approximately 130 small- and medium-sized companies in the region, which actively strives to gain a stronger international foothold. Through this consortium, Ties helps plan and implement marketing projects for the foods and wines of the area. He also has first-hand insight into Trentino culture: He speaks Italian, German and his native Ladin tongue.

In 2009, Trentino Export will be present at the Fancy Food Shows in San Francisco and New York. The organization uses

promotional events to create interest in the region's products among supermarket chains, retailers and other groups.

cheeses reach new heights

Dairy cows enjoy a stroll in the Dolomite Mountains just as much as tourists do. However, as skiers flock to the snowy slopes in cold weather, the cattle graze on the lower elevations. Once the melting icecaps send the tourists to Lake Garda, the cows climb back up the hills to take advantage of tasty new grasses. There are, of course, exceptions. Some cows remain at low altitudes year-round, where the pristine grazing lands offer a continuous variety of aromatic herbs and fragrant flowers. Sometimes goat cheese is made, such as the Caprino di Cavalese, but for the most part, area cheeses are made from cow's milk.

Trentino boasts a surprising number of Protected Denomination of Origin (PDO) cheeses for such a small, lesser-known production area; this means many of the region's cheeses proudly wear the PDO status that's carefully regulated by the European Union. Currently, the four name-protected cheeses with production in Trentino are Grana Padano, Asiago, Sprezza delle Giudicarie and Provolone Valpadana.

Trentino's historic mountain cheeses are both typical and unique. On the one hand, they share traits with the Alpine cheeses of Switzerland, France, Austria and Germany: They are large, hefty and lend themselves to robust, rib-sticking regional dishes. On the other hand, each cheese possesses an individual spirit that whispers secrets of its native valley or plateau, such as Fassa, Fiemme, Vanoi and Primiero.

the universal appeal of grana padano

Grana Padano is a staple of Trentino cuisine, and Trentino is one of the areas authorized to produce this cheese. Similar to Parmigiano-Reggiano in look and texture, Grana Padano stands tall on its own as a premium "grana" style cheese. Its delicate texture brings out the best in all Italian dishes, but it marries particularly well with Northern Italian fare. It can be eaten alone or with fruit, grated over hot dishes or shaved onto salads. In Trentino, where polenta—a porridge of corn, buckwheat, potato or a blend thereof—is the starch of choice, Grana Padano is especially popular. In its darker, more sinis-





CRUCOLO—THE FUGITIVE CHEESE!

Although not a fugitive in the traditional sense of the word, for many years, milky Crucolo cheese kept to itself in the cellars of a Trentino mountain refuge 3,600 feet above sea level. The only way to taste or purchase this fine cheese was to trek through thick forests of pine and fir to the Rifugio Crucolo itself.

Once Crucolo's delicious secret was revealed in the late 1990s, the demand for this cheese became so great it finally descended the Alps, thanks to the help of Savello USA, Inc., an importer based in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

Crucolo started out as a buttery cow's milk cheese with a spattering of spongy holes and a flavor of sweet youth. The line soon expanded to include a firmer, more aged version soaked in the local Teroldego red wine and a 90-day-old wheel suitable for grating. When exploring this range of Trentino cheeses, one experiences the cheese as it takes its forma, or "shape," which comes from the same root word as formaggio, Italian for cheese.

With Crucolo cheese finally out of hiding, another Trentino delicacy emerged from the Rifugio: cured Trentino speck. While many associate this lightly smoked, spiced ham with Alto Adige and Austria, Trentino's speck boasts a secret spice mix and a hint of beech wood. The locals enjoy it sliced prosciutto-style with cheese and hearty bread. CC

ter moments, Grana Padano plays a role in a singular spinach dumpling dish called strangolapreti, or "priest strangler."

vezzena: the emperor's new cheese

"This cheese was so good and famous that Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria insisted it always be present on his table," says Margaret Cicogna, an Italian cheese purchaser and consultant for the Atalanta Corporation of Elizabeth, New Jersey.

She believes Vezzena is Trentino's most important cheese. "Vezzena is not a PDO cheese, but since it's so particular and historic, the province brands it with a special marking to give it the recognition it merits."

Trentino's grating and cooking cheese of choice for centuries, Vezzena is produced from June to September. "It's made only from the milk of cows that graze on the pastures of the high plateau of Vezzena, where the grasses are rich with flora and herbs," Cicogna elaborates. "Before the First World War, this cheese was pretty much the only one in this area and used in all the local dishes."

Per Cicogna's orders, no Vezzena under 24 months will receive her approval, and all must be hand-picked and made by small producers in the malghe, the name for the mountain pastures.

asiago at all ages and stages

Asiago, a well-known cow's milk cheese from northeastern Italy, comes in three incarnations: young, medium and aged. Asiago Fresco Pressato, the youngest and richest, appeals to palates across generations and national boundaries. The two aged versions of Asiago d'Allevo, which are released at both the firm "mezzano" and semi-hard "vecchio" stages, are made of partially skimmed milk. They pair well with mellow red wines.



Several creameries in northern Italy make Asiago, but the primary producer in Trentino is Caseria Monti Trentini. Monti Trentini attributes the success of Trentino Asiago to the province's green grass, fresh water, healthful air and fragrant mountain flowers. As Monti Trentini puts it: "Our products blossom."

In addition to traditional Asiago, Monti Trentini produces innovative cheeses, some of which are available in the United States. One of these is called Pan di Cacio. In keeping with its name—"bread of cheese"—it actually looks like a loaf of bread and obtains its toasty crust through an oven-smoking process. For fans of ultra-creamy cheeses, there is fresh Pannarello, a perfect match for the sparkling wines of Lake Garda.

trentino's original low-fat cheese

Spressa delle Giudicarie is a beautiful by-product of butter-making. In ancient Italy, high in the Dolomite Mountains of Trentino, peasants learned to make the most of every ounce of cows' milk. First, they skimmed as much fat as possible from the top of the milk to obtain the greatest quantity of butter. With the remaining milk, they created a large, sturdy wheel of cheese, which would one day surpass the local butter in popularity.

In spite of its humble and somewhat haphazard beginnings, Spressa became one of the most historical cheeses of the Alpine region. Today, its fat content has been increased, but Spressa remains lower in fat and is firmer than other mountain cheeses. Its characteristic hard texture makes it suitable for grating or shaving, and Spressa can be blended with other hard cheeses such as Vezzena, Grana Padano or Asiago d'Allevo in dishes.

puzzone di moena

Who would eat a cheese with a name that translates as

"Big Stinker?" The fans of *Puzzone di Moena*, a whole cow's milk cheese from the municipality of Moena. This distinctive cheese owes its full flavor and aroma to a special aging process. For a period ranging from three months to a year, it's washed weekly with salt and water. *Puzzone di Moena* started out as a humble, hometown cheese. Atalanta's Cicogna says the cheese was originally called *nostrale* or *nostrano*, meaning "ours." Such regional claims to cheese date back to times when every valley, mountain or province had its own *nostrale*. "This is a particularly tasty cheese," says Cicogna. "As most washed rind cheeses, it has a very full aroma—a nicer description than 'smelly' cheese."

fruits of the mountain and the vine

With apples as the mainstay of Trentino fruit production, Austrian-inspired apple pastries with names in either Italian or German—or a mixture of both—are common. Apples serve as the core of *Zelten* Christmas fruitcakes, *Frittelle di Mele* fritters and *Strudel di Mele*. Other native fruits, such as strawberries, blueberries and indigenous *frutti di bosco* (forest fruits), show up in fillings and spreads as well. Menz & Gasser, a South Tyrolean firm operating out of both Trentino and Alto Adige, makes a colorful array of jams and syrups to accommodate the region's fruit cravings.

The grape is another fruit that stars in Trentino. Scott Petersen, owner and managing partner of Petersen Imports of Arlington, Massachusetts, is a 20-year veteran of the New York wine trade. Peterson's vision is to introduce and grow a portfolio of unique, small production wines that are true to their origins and offer incredible value. In Trentino, he discovered a wealth of lesser-known, yet highly food-friendly wines, made from grapes that are just as varied as the Trentino climate.

"As for wine climates, it seems the lower vineyards extending down the river plain to Lake Garda are warmer and the ideal home for the *Teroldego Rotaliano*," Petersen says. "Higher up in elevation, one sees a shift to *Lagrein* as the red grape of the vineyards."

Teroldego, an inky, moderately tannic red grape grown in the *Rotaliana* plain, is used to craft the first Trentino wine assigned the Controlled Denomination of Origin (DOC).





NORTHERN ITALY'S UNLIKELY OLIVE OIL

Fine olive oil from the north of Italy? Yes. Besides traditional wines, Lake Garda is renowned for its olive oil, which has been name-protected under the Protected Denomination of Origin (PDO) of "Garda" since 1997. Lake Garda is surrounded by chilly hills, yet it remains a pocket of warmth and sunshine for olive groves.

The oils of Lake Garda are known for their elegant texture. Principal

olives cultivated include the local Casaliva—closely related to Tuscan Frantoio—as well as Grignan, Frantoio, Leccino and Pendolino. These blends produce an herbaceous, fruity and nutty oil with a healthy balance of bitterness. CC



One of the oddest alcoholic beverages of Trentino is a flaming brandy drink called *Parampampoli*. Although its origins are lost in history, its popularity lives on. *Parampampoli* is a blend of brandy, sugar, wine, brewed coffee and honey. The mixture is first heated in a saucepan. After it comes to a boil, it's lit with a match and ladled into small demitasse cups. When the flame disappears, the liqueur is ready to drink. But beware: The hot ceramic can burn the lips!

italian fire and ice

Between *flambé* drinks and crisp sparkling wines, the northern Italian province of Trentino offers curious foodies a fantasy of flavors and new ideas for entertainment. An Italian Alpine-themed event appeals to those who relish savory meats, cheeses, offbeat wines, unconventional grains and cross-cultural food experiences. Trentino is a timeless example of the merging of diverse peoples and the artful foods that sprout from thousands of years of culture clash and mingling.

Ancient Trentino suddenly seems "new" in the United States, and in spite of its chilly, snow-capped mountains, Trentino will be forever "hot." CC

Marzemino, another popular DOC red wine from the region, was once treasured on the tables of emperors and Venetian dukes.

The moderate climate of the area surrounding Lake Garda allows various white wine grapes to thrive as well. Closer to the lake's edge are Chardonnay vineyards that produce grapes for still and sparkling wines. Petersen describes the region's sparkling wine as a "hallmark of Trentino, which reflects very high quality."

Although the wine routes of Trentino are not as accessible to tourists as those of California's Napa Valley, they nevertheless embellish the travel experience and serve as a valuable selling point in travel guides. "I think Trentino is potentially great for tourism," says Petersen. "I love the beauty and ruggedness of its countryside. It reminds me a little of Burgundy, but with twisty mountain roads and dramatic scenery. I think wine tourism would be helpful in revealing the beauty of the wines and food of this region and also push the wineries to show off what they can do."

The wines of Trentino are produced primarily as accompaniments to meals, but as wine and cheese pairings grow in popularity—and since some cheeses are even cured in local wines—the serendipity of the marriage grows. "It's like the way two colors painted next to each other can create an energy that makes each color much more intense," Petersen notes. "It's almost like an electricity."

for more information

Visit the following Web sites when planning your trip to Trentino!

Trentino SpA, www.trentino.to, is a marketing and tourist resource, offering information on local holidays, festivals, sports, hotels and wellness centers.

VisitGarda, www.visitgarda.com, focuses on the outdoor activities of Lake Garda, including camping, water sports, hiking and biking.

Ingarda Trentino, www.gardatrentino.it, provides an updated, season-appropriate guide to holidays, festivals, sports and food events of Lake Garda.

The Roads of Wine and Flavors of Trentino, www.stradedelvinodeltrentino.com, is devoted to the exploration of the wine territories and regional food producers. Outlined are seven "roads," including "Apples and the Flavors of the Non and Sole Valleys" and "Road of Cheese of the Dolomites."