



The Corner of Delicious Surprises

By Caroline Hostettler

Emilia-Romagna and Rome might be the more popular Italian food destinations. And Piemonte or Tuscany may be better known for their wines. But Trentino offers everything delectable from Apples to Zweigelt. With pride and of high quality.

The two-hour-long train ride from Milano made for a slow, smooth introduction to the facts and beauties of Trentino: This northeasternmost corner of Italy bordering Austria consists of a few Roman towns including the capital Trento, picturesque villages, a lot of mountains and, thus, ski resorts. It is a rural region not only famous for its apples but also for its quietness and moderation. Oh, and for its wines and mushrooms and cheeses and often smoky cuisine. But let's go in order.

Leaving the big city craziness mile by plodding mile, I arrived in Trento like I had gently been tucked into a cozy bed. I was relaxed and ready for a sweet dream. Which started right away when I opened the regional paper and, while sipping a

cappuccino, realized how many food-related events were going to take place this one upcoming weekend alone: There was an organic trade fair and a show called "Aromas, Flavors, Traditions." There was a market festival and a bread and strudel market, a fungus feast, and a get-together of the local Slow Food Chapter. Had I just discovered the food capital of my dream world?

The following days in rustic Trentino answered the question clearly and in a positive way. There was food everywhere, and it was well-produced and well-prepared food at all times. The joy started in the morning when I tasted simply the best hazelnut spread I had ever eaten in my life (growing up in Europe, I had eaten a good share of it...). It came from Sottobosco Paoli, a really small producer of jellies, compotes,

nectars, honeys, candies and preserves of fruit, nuts and vegetables exclusively from the region. There are neither preservatives nor artificial flavors or colors used in this small family-owned factory. The proprietor started this business after a career as a chef. His target was to bring out the flavors and treasures of the region's abundance of fruits and vegetables in the most natural, pure and best-tasting way. The thick, velvety smooth nectars are a translation of his philosophy. How else would you interpret a sip that makes one believe he or she had just bitten into a whole handful of perfectly ripe raspberries at once?

Driving through the country, hills up and hills down, stopping at fruit stands and in small bars, I wasn't surprised to learn that there was another jelly producer around. The only surprise was where Menz & Gasser are located and how huge the operation is. The ultramodern factory occupies what seems to be the only flat space in the tiny village of Novaledo. Mysteriously burnt down less than 10 years ago, the operation was rebuilt and restructured in the most high-tech way possible. Every little detail here makes sense. The flow of production steps goes on high speed; quality control and avoiding of hazards happen after every single step; waste in every segment is kept down to a minimum. One of the machines spits out 7000 pounds of pureed fruits per hour. Another one checks that the lids are on properly. Only the definition of products it seems, is man-made. Besides all classic marmalades and jellies, Menz & Gasser also covers the market with trendy low-sugar products, mini portion packages, products for foodservice and more.

Azienda Agricola Biologica Debiasi Stefano, a one-man company just outside of Rovereto, literally uses the organic vegetables from Stefano's front yard — the backyard is nothing but a steep rocky mountain — to manufacture his spreads, purees, *sottoli* and sauces. No ingredient has been grown more than three miles away from the factory. Stefano and his mother, plus — depending on the height of the piles of tomatoes, peppers, onions, zuccheti, eggplants and other vegetables — between one and three