

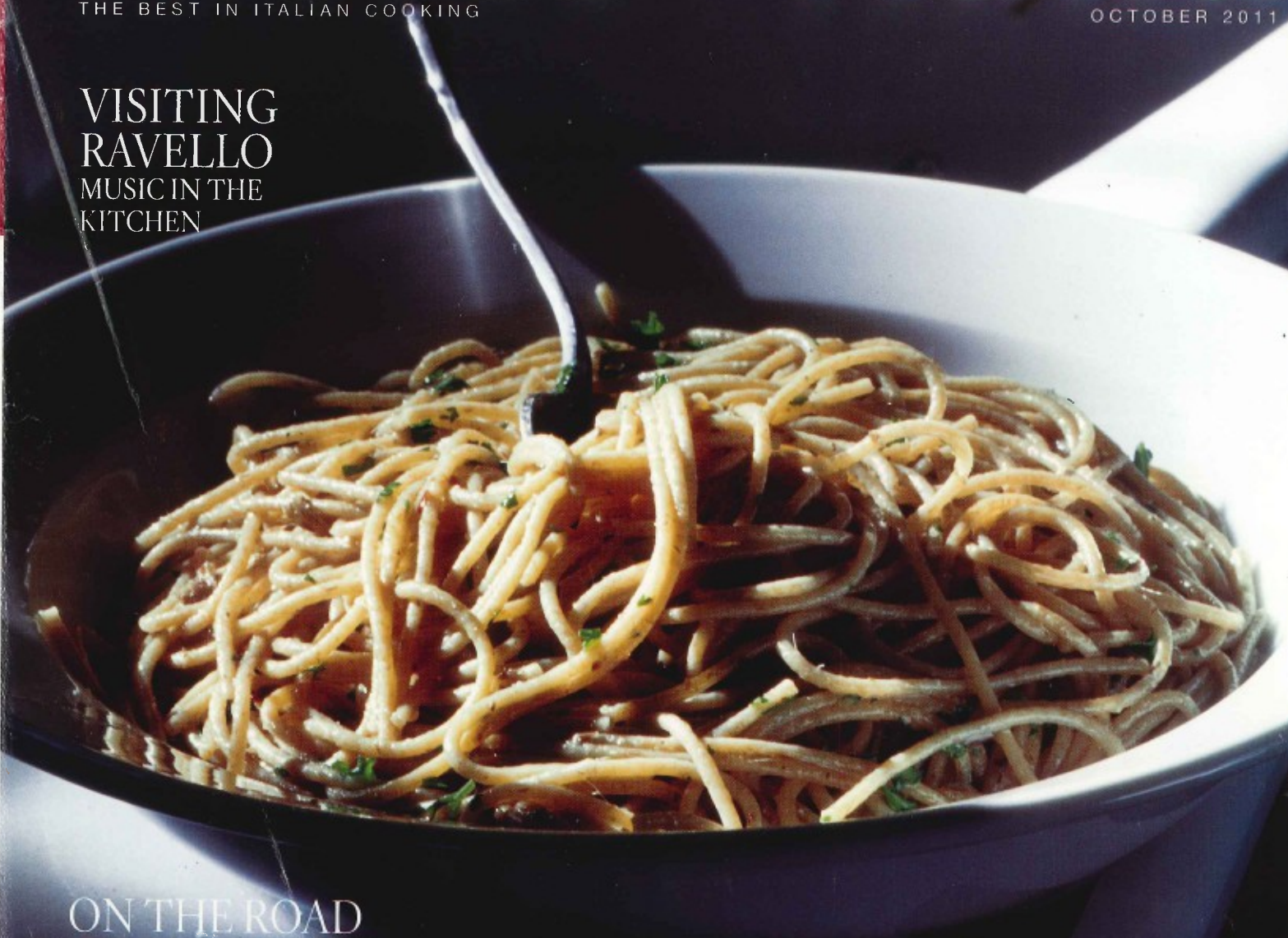
INSIDE ITALY: COOKING WITH MUSHROOMS

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VISITING RAVELLO/COOKING WITH MUSHROOMS/FALL CLASSICS

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EXPLORE

The Road to Piedmont

**Take a ski vacation that includes plenty
of time for eating the marvelous
dishes of this region.**

[By Susan Van Allen]



“Voilà,” says the waiter, as he places a luscious desert before me. Voilà? Am I in Italy?

Yes, but in this northwest region of Piedmont, a French influence sparkles through the language and cuisine. This desert, a chocolate flan-like goodie, even has a French sounding name: Bonet—pronounced Bo-NAY. In Piedmont dialect, Bonet means hat, because the sweet is a typical topper to the region’s delicious meals.

For most of the 20th century, Piedmont was known to outsiders as an industrial region, home to Fiat, Italy’s biggest car manufacturer. But over the past 25 years, travelers have begun to discover the pleasures of what’s going on here besides cars.

This is a region of outstanding natural resources, agriculture, and food artisans. There are prized white truffles in its forests, plentiful fish in its Alpine lakes and streams, fertile fields of rice, vineyards of Nebbiolo grapes that are turned into world renowned Barolo wines. Wheat is a major crop, which creates signature pastas, such as agnolotti—tiny ravioli-like creations, stuffed with delicately flavored stewed meats. Cattle are bred in Piedmont valleys and milked for top-of-the-line cheeses, such as Gorgonzola and Robiola. Chestnuts, walnuts, and hazelnuts thrive here, and are used in wonderful dolce—particularly the famous gianduja—a triangular shaped chocolate-hazelnut candy.

This region is also home to the excellent Lavazza coffee company, and the drink is enjoyed in fancy historical caffes in Turin, where Bicerin, an espresso-chocolate-cream concoction that was invented here centuries ago is definitely what to order. With all these treasures, it’s no wonder that in 1989, Carlo Petrini, a native of Piedmont’s village of Bra, was inspired to create Slow Food, now an international organization that promotes good, clean, and fair food for all.

On my recent trip to Piedmont, I found the culinary scene in outstanding shape. I landed near the French border, in the Via Lattea (Milky Way), where the 2006 Olympics took place. For the first time in decades I put on skis, and got in on not only the invigorating sporty scene amidst snow covered Alps, but also excellent food



LUSH LIFE: Piedmont is noted for its beautiful Alpine lakes, and Nebbiolo grapes used to make the world-renowned Barolo wine.

and wine. Thankfully there's a leisurely approach to skiing here, which leaves plenty of time for eating – in rustic mountain huts by day and cozy village restaurants by night. Though the atmosphere in these places was always simple and homey, the dishes were rich and elegantly prepared.

A lovely spot in the village of Sestriere was the Ristorante du Grand Pere (French for Grandfather). Chef Adriana Miletto, a demure grey-haired signora, presided over the charming dining room that had been converted from a horse stable, serving homemade gnocchi in a heavenly cheese sauce, tjarin (thin egg noodles) with forest mushrooms, and a perfect apple tart. Another evening we wound up in the lobby of the Hotel Roseo, (also in Sestriere), at apertivo time, where we sat around a blazing fireplace, watching an awesome sunset over the alps, drinking prosecco, and dipping crusty bread and vegetables into the delicious Piemontese oil-garlic-anchovy specialty called bagna cauda, meaning “warm bath” in local dialect.

Years before this trip, I'd had an impressive lunch at the formal Marchesi di Barolo dining room, where an unforgettable Beef Barolo stew was a highlight. I was elated to have it again for lunch on this ski trip, where in the middle of the mountain in Bardonecchia my sporty friends and I snuggled into the rustic La Grangia, a chalet-styled restaurant. We sat at a long wooden table and passed around steaming bowls of polenta, with platters of sausages, Gorgonzola, and amazing Beef Barolo stew. When dessert came, it was Bonet, of course, a rich topper to energize us for our afternoon back on the slopes.

There is a fine art to combining cozy and elegant, and in Piedmont, I found this art to be extraordinarily perfected.

Bagna Cauda

- 3/4 cup olive oil**
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped garlic**
- 12 anchovy filets, minced**
- 4 tablespoons butter, softened**
- Salt**

For Dipping:

- 4 cups raw vegetables cut into bite-size pieces**

1 loaf crusty bread, sliced into bite-size pieces

In a heavy saucepan, heat the oil and garlic over low heat until the garlic becomes slightly golden. Add the anchovies, stirring, and mashing with a spoon until the anchovies dissolve into the mixture. Add the butter and stir until liquefied. Add salt to taste. Transfer the mixture into a fondue pot or chafing dish so it can be kept warm. Serve with vegetables and bread on the side for dipping.

Makes 6 servings.



Bonet

- 6 egg yolks**
- 1 cup sugar**
- 2 cups amaretti cookies, crushed**
- 2 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder**
- 4 cups warm milk**
- 2 tablespoons rum**
- 6 egg whites**

Preheat the oven to 300°F. Beat the egg yolks with sugar until smooth.

In a food processor, mix the egg yolk mixture with crushed amaretti cookies, cocoa, milk, and rum until smooth. Strain the mixture into a bowl. Beat the egg whites until stiff, then fold gently into the mixture. Pour into 8 individual ramekins (2 inch size).

Set the molds into a roasting pan and

fill the pan with hot water so it comes halfway up the sides of the ramekins. Bake for 30 minutes or until set. Let cool and then turn out onto individual plates and serve.

Makes 8 servings.

Beef Braised in Barolo

- 2 pounds beef for stewing (chuck or blade)**
- 1 red onion, coarsely chopped**
- 3 celery stalks, chopped**
- 3 carrots, chopped**
- 2 bay leaves**
- 1 to 2 sprigs fresh rosemary**
- 1 tablespoon juniper berries**
- 1 bottle of Barolo**
- 3 tablespoons butter, divided**
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil**
- Salt**

Mix the meat, vegetables, herbs, and wine in a large bowl. Cover and marinate for 24 hours.

Remove the meat and pat dry, reserving the wine and vegetable mixture. In a heavy saucepan, large enough to hold the meat and vegetables, heat the olive oil and 1 tablespoon of butter until quite hot, then put in the meat to brown it on all sides.

With a slotted spoon, remove the vegetables from the marinade and add them to the meat, stirring and cooking until they wilt and color lightly. Add the wine, turn the heat to high until the wine boils, then lower to a simmer and cover.

Cook for two hours, stirring every 30 minutes, until the meat is tender when pricked with a fork. If the cooking liquid evaporates, add warm water.

Remove the meat and set aside, under foil to keep warm. Put the wine and vegetables in a blender, discarding the bay leaves and juniper berries. Blend into a sauce. Heat 2 tablespoons of butter in the saucepan, stirring and loosening the residue from the braising, then add the blended wine and vegetable mixture, boiling over high heat until the sauce thickens. Add salt to taste. Pour the sauce over the meat and serve promptly.

Makes 6 servings.