

A U S T R A L I A N

# GOURMET

THE

## Chocolate ISSUE

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# Cocoa loco

Italy is mad for chocolate – so much so it has three distinct schools of the dark arts where the likes of France and Belgium have but one, writes **John Irving**.

**Five hundred years** ago in Mexico, among a cornucopia of hitherto unknown foods, the Spaniards discovered xocolatl, cacao seeds, which the Aztecs mixed with water and drank as a beverage, a precursor to drinking chocolate. When they brought the seeds home, the drink was quick to spread across Europe.

Emanuele Filiberto, Duke of Savoy, first tasted it in Spain in 1559 and took some cacao beans back to his capital, Turin. And it was in Turin, just over 200 years later, that a certain Signor Doret perfected the art of solidifying chocolate. Workshops began producing chocolate bars and other countries sent their people to the city to learn the ropes. Today Turin is the capital of the Piedmont region in Italy's north-west, and the nation's chocolate capital. No mean achievement considering that, unlike countries such as France, Belgium and Switzerland, which each has its own national school of chocolate, Italy has three: not just the Piedmontese, but also the Tuscan and the Sicilian.

There's nothing clandestine about Piedmont's love affair with chocolate. Every town in the region has its own chocolate icon, from the baci of Cherasco to the cuneesi of Cuneo. Along the rambling porticoes of the centre of Turin itself, the cafés and pasticcerie are choc-a-block, as it were, with variations on the theme. Back in 1725, to celebrate Easter the Giambone shop on the present-day Via Roma displayed a live hen and a few eggshells filled with liquid chocolate in its window. Unwittingly, it was anticipating the chocolate Easter egg. It's no coincidence that it was Casa

Sartorio, again of Turin, that patented the first system for mass-producing chocolate eggs in 1924.

In a roundabout way, Piedmont has the British to thank for its greatest contribution to the chocolate world. During the Napoleonic Wars, the Brits blockaded the Straits of Gibraltar and prevented cacao from the New World entering the Mediterranean. To eke out their scant supplies, Piedmontese confectioners blended cacao into a paste with crushed local hazelnuts. They called the resulting mixture gianduja after Gioan d'la douja, a local carnival mask, and used it to make giandujotti, small overturned-boat-shaped chocolates.

Turin's reigning "re del gianduiotto" Guido Gobino's chocolate factory is on Via Cagliari, a nondescript back street on the wrong side of Turin's splendid centro storico. Though it's anything but a palace on the outside, inside his Laboratorio Artigianale del Giandujotto is a sanctuary for chocolate pilgrims. It's here in a state-of-the-art production area that Gobino, neat and dapper in his white lab-technician's coat, works his magic. At once a purist and a pathfinder, Gobino is pushing the giandujotto into the future. His painstaking experiments with chocolate, hazelnuts and spices have spawned exciting novelties, one of which, the Tourinot Maximo +39, hand-tempered and containing more than 39 per cent of the finest Piedmontese hazelnuts, was outright winner of Italy's Best Gianduja Chocolate award for five years on the trot from 2012 to 2016. The Piedmontese school is in steady hands.

It was in the early 17th century that merchant Francesco Carletti introduced cacao beans to Florence, where Cosimo III de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, seems to have enjoyed drinking chocolate. There followed a 400-year hiatus during which, any passion for chocolate in Tuscany remained dormant.

End of story? No, because Tuscans like nothing better than a renaissance, which is precisely what took place a couple of decades ago: a rebirth of chocolate in the towns of the Pistoia-Pisa-Prato triangle, now nicknamed Chocolate Valley. Like the flowering of painting and sculpture under the influence of classical models in the 15th century, the revival involved a random coming together of artistic talents in highly specialised workshops. "Chocolate Valley came into being by chance," says *mâîtresse chocolatière* Cecilia Tessieri of Amedei in Pontedera. "A few of us happened to find ourselves together in the early 1990s in a brave new world full of positive energy."

Aside from Tessieri, the modern-day equivalents of the Masaccios and Botticellis of the Renaissance with a capital "R" are artisan chocolatiers such as Roberto Catinari, Andrea Trinci and Andrea Slitti, the first Italian to win the Grand Prix International de la Chocolaterie in Paris.

Cecilia Tessieri founded Amedei (her maternal grandmother's maiden name) in 1990. After travelling to cacao-producing countries, she began pioneering the *cru* concept, using beans mainly from Jamaica, Venezuela, Ecuador and Madagascar. "In our pursuit of excellence," she says, "we selected our cacao beans directly at the source, in the plantations."

She commercialised her first single-origin bars in 1998, and since then the production range has expanded to include pralines and chocolate cream made with extra-virgin Tuscan olive oil.

Amedei's declared mission "To make the world a little sweeter, one bar at a time" applies to the whole of Chocolate Valley, whose goodies are showcased at *Cioccolosità*, organised in Monsummano Terme in February-March every year.

There can be few weirder snacks than *'mpnatigghia*, a crisp pastry disc filled with toasted almond paste, cinnamon, plain chocolate and... fried minced veal. It's a so-called "*dolce da viaggio*", a sweet for a journey, ideal in the past for putting in the kitbags of soldiers setting off for war or the luggage of emigrants embarking for the Americas. It's a specialty of the charming Baroque town of Modica in southern Sicily and a testimony to its chocolate tradition. The name itself is a Sicilian corruption of *empanada*, the island having been part of the Spanish empire for centuries. At one time the trade of "*u ciuculattaru*", or chocolate maker, was common in Modica, and the town is still full of establishments selling *cioccolato di Modica* in myriad shapes and forms. Today the best place to go to taste it is *Antica Dolceria Bonajuto*, founded in 1880.

What makes *cioccolato di Modica* unique is the production technique. It's cooked at a temperature

of only 50 degrees celsius, which means the sugar used to sweeten it doesn't melt completely and flavourings such as vanilla, cinnamon, chilli, cloves and carob can be added at the beginning of the process without being spoiled by heat. The rough, granular chocolate is an acquired taste, but the great Sicilian novelist Leonardo Sciascia declared it "unparalleled in flavour".

No one is more *au fait* with its secrets than Modica born-and-bred chef Peppe Barone of the Michelin-commended *Fattoria delle Torri* restaurant. He was brought up on the stuff and uses it imaginatively in a filling for cuttlefish, in a sauce for prawns and to coat fava beans. But asked how he likes it best, he answers "*pane e cioccolato*" – bread with chocolate, the food of childhood memories.

The Italian word *cioccolataio* (chocolate maker-seller) is sometimes used colloquially in a derogatory sense: "*fare la figura del cioccolataio*" meaning "to make a fool of oneself". The fact it's *de rigueur* these days to use the classier French word "*chocolatier*" is significant. It means that thanks to the contribution of its three distinct schools, Italy has raised the chocolate bar. Cecilia Tessieri strikes a note of caution when she says, "Today the chocolate world has expanded a lot and marketing often prevails over the true quality of the chocolate." But she adds, "What counts is not being driven by fashion but keeping quality high." ●

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