

The Medicis' Favourite Jasmine Chocolate is Recreated in Sicily

Katia Amore | Monday, September 29, 2014 - 12:15

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This year 'La festa dei Gelsomini' (The Jasmine Festival) - on the 27th and 28th of September in Giarre, Sicily - had a special guest, a jasmine infused chocolate made according to an ancient recipe by doctor Francesco Redi who prepared it in Florence for Cosimo III de' Medici in the 17th century...and I had the honor of tasting it!

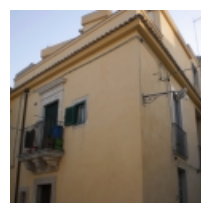
When I got a message from my friend Pierpaolo Ruta of Antica Dolceria Bonajuto in Modica, saying they had finally managed to make Redi's jasmine chocolate, I knew what to do, go to the 'dolceria' and TRY it. I met him and his father, Franco Ruta, outside the 'dolceria' in the small alley off Corso Umberto I. We sat on the bench where we often meet to talk about food, politics, children and, obviously, chocolate, immersed in the tempting aromas of orange peel, toasted almonds, cocoa and fried cannoli shells.

With a sparkle in his eye, Pierpaolo tells me: 'You know how much we wanted to make chocolate following Redi's recipe, we thought it would be impossible, until we met the guys of Vivaio Malvarosa di Giarre (near Catania), who were able to provide the right amount of jasmine flowers required. And now I cannot believe we actually made it.'

Then he goes to get me a sample to taste while Franco stairs at me with a smile that suggests his awareness of having created, once more, something amazing.

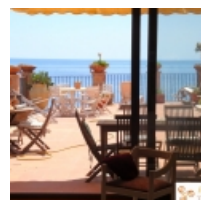
In the small squared transparent box, six flat 1 gr chocolate chips look really like nothing special. Then I open the box and suddenly my nose is overwhelmed by the combination of chocolate and jasmine aromas. When I try it, that smile I had noticed on Franco Ruta's face appears on mine too - 'they made it ... and it tastes like heaven!' I thought. While I enjoy Cosimo de' Medici's favourite

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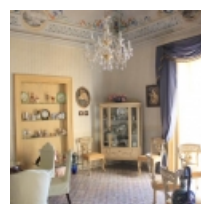
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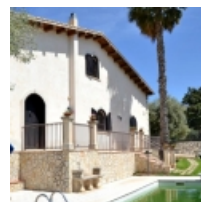
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chocolate, Pierpaolo explains more about the 'experiment'.



Piglia cacao torrefatto, e ripulito, e stritolato grossamente libbre 10. Gelsomini freschi sufficienti da mescolar con detto cacao, facendo strato sopra strato in una scatola, o altro arnese, e si lasciano stare 24. ore, e poi si levano, e si tornano a mettere altrettanti in esso cacao, facendo strato sopra strato come prima; e così ogni 24. ore si mettano gelsomini freschi per dieci o dodici volte. Poi piglia zucchero bianco buono asciutto libbre 8. Vaniglie perfette onco iij. Cannella fina perfetta onco vj. Ambra grigia dan. ij., e secondo l'arte si fa il cioccolato; avvertendo nel fabbricarlo, che la pietra sia poco calda, ma che l'artefice lo lavori, che non passi quattro o cinque libbre per massa al più, perchè se scaldasse troppo la pietra, e' perderebbe il suo odore.

Come poi il cioccolato comune si fabbrica, veggasi l'annotazioni al Ditiramb.

Francesco Redi (1626 – 1697) is considered the founder of experimental biology and the father of modern parasitology. He was a physician, naturalist, and also a poet who obtained his doctoral degrees in medicine and philosophy in 1647 at the University of Pisa, at the age of 21. A year later, he settled in Florence, where he was registered at the Collegio Medico and served at the Medici Court as head physician and superintendent of the ducal apothecary to Ferdinando II de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, and his successor, Cosimo III. It is here that most of Redi's academic works were achieved and where he also enjoyed preparing different kind of 'cioccolatte', including his special jasmine chocolate.

Redi kept the recipe secret, it was only published after his death. In his notes, he describes an interesting process involving grinding the cocoa on a stone (the Aztec metate) that could only be reproduced in Modica, where chocolate is still prepared at low temperature following the original technique brought by the Spaniards in the 16th century. This is the element that struck the Rutas when they first came across his recipe a few years ago. It is a very complex recipe and requires time, patience and, above all, a huge quantity of jasmine flowers, around 250 per kilogram of cocoa nibs a day for ten days.

The jasmine buds must be collected at dusk, before they open and give off their intense and delicate fragrance to infuse the cocoa. They only last one day, so for ten days, each evening begins with a new crop of jasmine buds to be mixed with the cocoa. More than 2,500 flower buds per kilogram in total.



DAY TRIPS

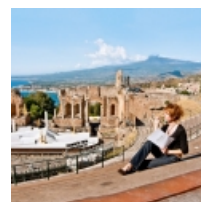
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This is why Filippo Figuera's nursery [Vivaio Malvarosa](#) proved to be the perfect partner: they specialise in rare kinds of jasmine and could finally satisfy the quantity required by Redi's recipe. The video below by director [Ivano Fachin](#) captures this odd encounter perfectly:

Il Cioccolato al gelsomino del Granduca di Toscana da una ricetta di Fran...



Before saying goodbye I ask, 'When will I be able to buy a full box?' But I am immediately reminded about the very Italian art of starting a project for the project's sake, just out of passion and not for commercial reasons. At the moment, they have produced only a relatively small quantity just to prove that it can be done, they explain.

So considering how rare this chocolate is, as soon as I am back at my cooking school, I sit and eat a second 1 gr piece of heavenly 17th century jasmine chocolate. Suddenly, in a true Proustian moment, I get thrown back to a much more recent past, to the time when I visited my grandparents at the end of summer. There was always a small china dish filled with jasmine flowers next to another small dish full of pieces of Modica's chocolate on my grandfather's desk, in the very same spot where I am sitting. That's when I realise that a secret chocolate recipe turned, unexpectedly, in the most unusual time-machine.

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