

BOLETTIN
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A Piedmontese Delicacy with a French Name

Baci di dama, *frittura dolce*, *marrons glacés*, all specifically designed to raise your AIC—true antidotes to Metformin and Ozempic. They're also Piedmontese delicacies that my aunt Letizia of blessed memory used to prepare in her kitchen, first in the Mission and then in the Southern Hills district of San Francisco. Born in Rochetta Tanaro near Asti, Zia brought over the recipes in 1952.

The last-mentioned sweets are not just candied chestnuts. Chestnuts (*castagne*) are a dime a dozen, but *marroni* are something special. You see, the former have three or four nuts per pod, while the latter nestle only one or two nicely plump ones. The *marrone* is also distinctive in that its shell is lighter in color (a tannish hazelnut rather than dark brown) and that the maroon-colored skin between the shell and the nut does not penetrate the flesh, thus protecting it from breakage. (Anyone who has boiled chestnuts has encountered the pesky problem of ingrown skin.)

The tree is a variety of *Castanea sativa*, developed over the centuries by grafting. In Italy, the main zones of cultivation are the province of Cuneo and areas in Emilia, Tuscany and Lazio.

As to the confection itself, *marrons glacés* were invented in Turin at the court of the Duchy of Savoy during the reign of Charles Emmanuel I (1580-1630). (At the time, the language of the court was French.) It is said that they resulted from a mistake: when a cook boiled chestnuts in sugar syrup rather than in plain water. In any case, the new delicacy quickly became popular on both sides of the Alps, and it was all the rage at the court of Louis XIV.

The recipe for home cooks involves a number of procedures. I will not delineate them, as anyone with a computer or smart phone can access the recipe from the internet. The *marroni* themselves are not readily accessible to everyone. Obviously, the pedestrian *castagna* can be used as a substitute, and I suspect that this is what Zia Letizia actually employed.

I Caffè Storici di Torino dal Risorgimento ad Oggi

Il secolo d'oro dei Torinesi è stato l'Ottocento e in particolare il periodo fra il 1849 e il 1860, quando il fervore risorgimentale e le guerre d'indipendenza portarono alla città esuli e patrioti da ogni parte dell'Italia. Molti di loro vivevano in abitazioni poco confortevoli e a volte precarie, quindi i caffè erano i locali ideali per trascorrere buona parte delle loro giornate. Allora si poteva incontrare Cavour, La Marmora, Brofferio, Rattazzi, Lorenzo Valerio, D'Azeglio, e sedersi in locali arredati con fantastici lampadari, boiserie, dorature e specchi, che a tutt'oggi possono ancora essere ammirati.



LOCALE STORICO

Nel 1839 risultavano già ben 98 botteghe da caffè, e tra questi i preferiti di Cavour. Al Bicerin, di fronte al Santuario della Consolata, il più piccolo e il più antico della città, risalendo al 1763. Sembra che il conte, liberale e anticlericale, non accompagnasse la famiglia alla Messa della Consolata ma preferisse attenderla dal lato opposto, sorbendosi la specialità di questo caffè, "il bicerin". Anche il caffè Florio, fondato nel 1780—soprannominato "il caffè dei codini", cioè della nobiltà reazionaria—vanta la presenza costante di Cavour. Si racconta che il re Carlo Alberto, aprendo le udeinze del mattino, domandasse: "Qu'est-ce dit au café Florio?"

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Caffè Storici *continued*

Il caffè principale di Torino fu il San Carlo nella piazza omonima, il primo ad avere illuminazione a gas idrogeno nel 1822. Era frequentato da Francesco Crispi e dalla Sinistra parlamentare e poi da Giolitti, Gobetti, Einaudi, De Benedetti. Questo luogo ha un posto speciale nel mio cuore, poiché è stato testimone di memorabili chiaccherate con la mia mamma. Un po' più oltre sulla piazza, c'è il caffè Torino, con l'iconico e scaramantico toro metallico incastonato nella pavimentazione del parciapiède sotto i portici. Dall'altro lato della piazza troviamo Stratta, originariamente una confetteria, dove si trova l'elenco dei dolci con i relativi prezzi che, all'epoca, Cavour prelibava—fondants, caramelle, marrons glacés—ma che poi lasciava da pagare ai suoi addetti!

In piazza Castello si trova Baratti & Milano, aperto nel 1875, e poi a pochi passi Mulassano (1907). Quest'ultimo vanta un primato. A metà degli anni Venti, i Nebbiolo, rientrati dagli Stati Uniti, introdussero i primi "toast"—sulla falsariga del *sandwich* americano—panini farciti e morbidi, che Gabriele D'Annunzio definì "tramezzini". In piazza Vittorio, c'è il caffè Elena del 1889. Qui Giuseppe Carpano perfezionò la ricetta del vermouth. Se ci spostiamo un po' dal centro troviamo il Pratti, nato nel 1870, frequentato, insieme al caffè Pfätsch (1915), dalla élite letteraria del Novecento: Cesare Pavese, Giulio e Luigi Einaudi, Primo Levi, Mario Soldati, Indro Montanelli, Natalia Ginzburg, Norberto Bobbio e parecchi altri. In quest'ultimo è stato girato il film *Il Grande Torino*.

L'associazione locale di caffettieri di Torino sta lottando acciocché l'"arcipelago" degli storici caffè della città venga denominato dall'UNESCO patrimonio dell'umanità.

Maria De Venizia

Bacchus in the Central Valley

I am a third generation Piedmontese American. I grew up in the San Joaquin Valley, where my father raised tomatoes and almonds and various row crops. My mother was secretary of the high school that I attended in the town of Le Grand, about half way between Merced and Madera. This was a rural area. Everything in our family revolved around the crops. We monitored the temperature in February, March and April, and when it appeared that it would freeze, we left the house at 1:00 to 4:00 AM to light the smudge pots so as to save the tomato and almond crops.



With this agrarian background, let me explain something that I only learned after I left the farm. My maternal grandfather, Delfino Piano, made wine every fall from grapes that he bought from others. As was popular among Italian immigrants in the early years of the 20th century, this was a strong, robust wine with lots of tannin. I remember that we used to tease Nonno and tell him that he made better vinegar than wine.

The wine made in the fall was presented for its first drinking at Easter. What I never understood was why everyone, kids included, had to take a sip of the wine and then pour a tidy bit of it onto the table. Nonna would then frantically run around throwing salt on the spots of wine that were staining the white tablecloth. My grandfather was born in Grande Tanze, a *frazione* of Mattie, just a stone's throw from Susa, a Roman settlement with a forum and an arch of triumph honoring Caesar Augustus. The Susa pass is the pass that Hannibal came through when he entered Italy. There is a strong classical Roman legacy in this remote northwestern area of Piemonte.

Not until I was an undergraduate at UC Berkeley and took an anthropology class in primitive religions, did I learn what we were really doing around that Easter table in the Central Valley. It was nothing less than the old ritual libation to Bacchus, Roman god of wine and revelry. By the time I became aware of the meaning of this tradition, Nonno was gone and I never had the chance to talk to him about it.

There was one other tradition we kept at Easter. Every male in the family, no matter how young he was, had to eat a soft-boiled egg on Easter morning. When I was old enough, my father explained to me that this was meant to insure male fertility and thus assure that the family name would survive. It worked!

Vincent Fauzone, Jr. (Recycled from the Spring 2009 Boletín.)