
President's Message

The pandemic continues to disrupt our lives and our plans for social events. The Bagna Cauda Dinner scheduled for February 5 was cancelled because the Galileo Club of Richmond had staffing problems and feared a closure by Contra Costa County due to Covid restrictions. We are working on rescheduling that event for May or June as well as hosting a Scampagnata for July or August.

The Piedmontese Study Group, or Cit Sircol, continues to meet virtually via Zoom. Meetings are held on the first and third Thursdays of the month from 1:30 PM to 3:30 PM. Prior to the classes, participants are emailed stories in *piemontèis* along with a Zoom invitation. The stories provide the basic discussion matter for the Sircol. If you would like to attend, please send me an email at jadnot@yahoo.com.

I hope to see you at our next event and in the Piedmontese language classes. *Joseph Tonda*

The Origins of Grissini

Anybody who knows anything about food knows that those delectable, thin, crunchy breadsticks—No, not the thick, doughy, clunky ones from the Olive Garden!—are a gift to the world from Piemonte. But when were they invented and why? *Enquiring minds want to know!*

There are at least three genesis stories behind grissini, *grissin* or *ghersin* in Piedmontese.

(1) Gleaned from the back of a cardboard box containing grissini produced by the Antropos bakery of Carmagnola in the province of Torino is a succinct account claiming that the Turinese nobility of the 17th century invented them to nibble on. They thought it was elegant. Sounds bogus to me: the idea that effete aristocrats would sit down as a collective whole and invent a food item! Bogus or not, the breadsticks in question, halled as *rubatà classici* on the packaging, are truly thin, crisp and tasty. They are available at the Calabria Brothers delicatessen on Mission St. in the Excelsior District of San Francisco.

(2) Then there is the “news item” that appeared on the Microsoft Edge homepage on January 20, 2022, courtesy of *InsideHook*, a “lifestyle recommendation platform.” Here, the origin is more specific and credible. Growing up in the late 1600s, Vittorio Amedeo II was a frail and sickly child who had difficulty digesting just about anything. The court doctor diagnosed a case of chronic gastroenteritis from ingesting bread that contained pathogenic germs (as opposed to good ones) due to unhygienic preparation and undercooking. *Bravo boccia!* The local baker Antonio Brunero was tapped to produce a longer, thinner, crispier version of the baguettes eaten in Torino at the time. Cooked long enough to kill all the bad germs, Brunero’s invention cured the little heir of his ailments, and he went on to become the last Duke of Savoy and first King of Sardinia. All the above is corroborated in the website, claudiosspecialtybreads.com, with even more specificity. The court doctor was Don Baldo di Lanzo, and the original “baguette” in question was a rounded bread roll called a *ghersa*, hence the diminutive *ghersin*. The website adds that Napoleon Bonaparte was a big fan of what he called “les petits batons de Turin” and that he actually established a stagecoach line from that city to Paris just so he would have a steady supply of the little sticks. *Yeah sure!*

(3) Finally, according to an anthology of gastronomic history published by the Accademia Italiana della Cucina in 2011, grissini had existed in Piemonte at least three centuries before the birth and childhood illness of Vittorio Amedeo. Back then, the cost of bread was calculated according to the single loaf rather than by gross weight. The price of that roll, called a *grissia*, was fixed by the Annona, or government food authority, so that the masses could afford to eat. With the deflation of the currency in the second half of the 14th century, instead of raising the price of bread, the Annona started to diminish the size of it, until the *grissia* became...a *grissin*.

Will the real Ur-Grissino please stand up? My vote is for Number Two—“e se non è vero è ben trovato!”

C'era Una Volta...

C'era una volta un prete, un giovane curato toscano che, per qualche arcana ragione, fu sdradicato dalla sua nativa Lucca e mandato a dir Messa nella sola chiesa di un piccolo paesino sperduto sulle colline astigiane. Il paesino si chiamava come si chiama tuttora: Antignano. Bello e grassotto e con una parlantina che incantava, Don Piccini fece subito colpo e rustici e borghesi ne furono presto invaghiti. Senonchè, dopo nemmeno un mese di permanenza, il prete si rivelò fastidiato da tutto ciò che lo circondava, e tutto, proprio tutto, gli andava di traverso: la perpetua era brutta, il cibo insulso, i parrocchiani bifolchi e quadrupedi, e tutta la razza piemontese.

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uomini e bovini compresi, era “esecrabile.” Questa grossa parola mandò alcuni fra il suo gregge—cioè, quelli che sapevano leggere—a consultare il vocabolario. Una viva controversia sorse fra i parrochiani. Era il nuovo arrivato un prelatto per caso toscano o piuttosto un toscannaccio fattosi prete? Altri invece sostenevano che non si trattava di un vizio di mestiere né di un difetto d'origine, ma bensì che il trasferimento dalla ridente Toscana alle brume del Tanaro gli aveva guastato l'anima e amareggiato lo spirito. Fatto sta che Don Piccini continuava a dir peste e corna dei Piemontesi, chiamandoli falsi e cortesi, insinuanti e traditori. Il colmo arrivò quando, dai suoi borbottii in piazza e bottega, il prete passò a sputar veleno contro i Piemontesi perfino nei sermoni della domenica, in piena chiesa, accusandoli dal pulpito di doppiezza e slealtà. Fu allora che Monsù Miroglio, grosso mercante di meliga e assiduo frequentatore della Santa Messa, fece i dovuti passi, chiese un colloquio con il vescovo di Asti, e gli spiegò per esteso tutta la triste faccenda. L'Eminenza, piemontese fino alla punta delle pantofole ricamate, chiamò il discolo sacerdote in Vescovado e gli fece una bella lavatina di capo, non tralasciando naturalmente il piccolo dettaglio che Monsù Miroglio e gli altri “esecrabili” parrochiani subalpini erano quelli che, con il loro obolo domenicale, spalmavano il burro sulla sua michetta. Don Piccini trangugiò l'amaro calice e per un paio di settimane stette buono. Ma dentro bolliva ancora il suo livore. S'avvicinava la Pasqua e la sua ebollizione interna si faceva sempre più insopportabile. Non ne poteva proprio più e sentiva che in qualche modo doveva sfogarsi. Arrivò la Messa del Giovedì Santo con la solita predica sull'ultima cena di Gesù con gli Apostoli. Povero Don Piccini, fremendo sotto il divieto del vescovo di parlar male dei Piemontesi, raccontò a denti stretti le parole di Gesù che “Qualcuno fra di voi mi tradirà”. E Giovanni che disse, “Non sono io, Signore”, e Andrea che disse, “Nemmeno io, Gesù”, e Pietro che aggiunse, “Certamente non me”, e Giuda Iscariota che dichiarò enfaticamente... *A lè nen mi!* Da Antignano Don Piccini fu presto trasferito alla docesi di Caltanisetta. (This article has been recycled, with some minor modifications, from the Fall 2000 *Boletín*.)

El Bicerin

Have you ever had a *bicerin*, the hot, luscious drink of espresso, thick melted chocolate, and cream that originated in Turin? When I first heard the word *bicerin*, I thought that it simply referred to “small glass” in the Piedmontese language, the suffix *-in* denoting a diminutive.

Bicerin was created in the 18th century at the Caffè al Bicerin, a coffeehouse on the piazza across from the Santuario della Consolata in Turin.

After I learned that the drink was a very special and heavenly concoction, the next time in Turin I went to that café and then continued to drink it throughout Piemonte.

Here's the recipe yielding two servings:

1 cup heavy whipping cream, chilled	3 oz. dark chocolate, finely chopped
2 tablespoons confectioner's sugar	2 shots of hot espresso
1 cup whole milk	

Using a hand mixer, beat the cream with the sugar until it forms peaks, about 1 minute. In a saucepan, warm milk to a simmer. Add chocolate and whisk over low heat until the mixture begins to thicken, 1 minute.

In a clear heat-proof glass, layer the three distinct ingredients: hot chocolate at the bottom, followed by espresso, topped off by the whipped cream. Do not stir, and make sure that the espresso is poured over the back of a spoon so that it gently cascades into the glass. *Joseph Tonda*

Truffles in California with a Piedmontese Connection

Henry Trione (1920-2015) was a highly successful entrepreneur, nature preservationist, philanthropist, horseman and polo player. His parents hailed from Pont Canavese in the province of Torino, and he was a board member and generous donor to the Piemontesi nel Mondo. Many of you will remember the many *scampagnate* hosted by Henry at his Geyser Peak Winery in the Alexander Valley and later at the Polo Grounds in Santa Rosa. One of his dreams was to cultivate truffles right here in California. That dream has been realized, albeit posthumously. Henry knew truffles from his childhood, when relatives back in Piemonte would send the tubers packed in rice to flavor the annual family risotto feeds back in the 1920s and '30s. Since the Golden State is covered with oak trees, whose roots are a favorite symbiotic habitat for truffles, it was thought that there was a natural, spontaneous appearance of them here. Yes there is, but they're crap compared to their European cousins. Starting in the mid-1970s and spearheaded by Henry Trione, a movement to “seed” and harvest truffles in Northern California took off. The chief variety is the black truffle of Périgord (*tuber melanosporum*), now grown under 15,000 trees (mostly oak and hazelnut) in Sonoma, Lake, Mendocino and Napa counties. The most profitable truffle “orchard” is that of the Kendall Jackson Winery in Sonoma County. Truffle-sniffing dogs are imported from Italy to ferret out the tubers. I remember that in my mother's Astesan dialect, a *can da trifuli* (a truffle dog) means a gourmandizer, that is, a connoisseur of good eating and drinking.