

PRIDE AND JOY

IN ONE SMALL ITALIAN RIVIERA TOWN,
SUNNY DAYS CALL FOR A CARB-PACKED CELEBRATION.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUSAN WRIGHT



Post-meal pursuits on
Paraggi Bay, near Portofino.



IN LATE SPRING Italy's Liguria region is all shine, glow, gleam, and brilliance. Its cliffs, too steep to be modernized, are ideal for coastal walks – to rest on rocks, to await dawns and noons, and to contemplate islands and other circular matters one thinks of on a couple's ramble. S. and I did just that, walking one day the five miles from Rapallo to Portofino, agreeing on the way that the houses on the green hills resembled scattered pieces of Turkish delight, their sun-faded yellows, oranges, and reds like a dash of sugarcoating. Panning around, the sailboats in the bay were little wedges of Grana Padano, the trees broccoli rabe,

and every round window a pizza. Maybe we were just hungry.

It's difficult *not* to think of food on the Italian Riviera. Fishermen, when they turn home after a long day hauling line and setting lobster pots in the Ligurian Sea, set their minds on what awaits them: stuffed *pansoti* (ravioli) in creamy walnut sauce with a nice slice of *pasqualina* (savory Italian pie). Or maybe a plate of gnocchi smothered in pesto, followed by a slab of *stoccafisso* (stockfish) with black *taggiasche* olives and pine nuts. Or a bowl of *bagnun* (Ligurian anchovy soup) with extra anchovies. If they tire of fish, a simple bean-and-grain

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En route to the focaccia and (opposite) the festival's freshly baked star.

mesciua (soup) will do. They call these staples *cucina di ritorno*, food of the return, and the name has stuck to Ligurian cuisine like scorched cheese on the edge of a roasting pan.

I was thinking in particular about focaccia. Not the common tender, airy flatbread found everywhere, but focaccia di Recco, a thin, crispy variety, dripping its filling of hot cheese. Named for the little Ligurian town in which it's made (and made *only* there, locals are quick to point out), the recipe is no guarded secret: a thin dough of flour, salt, water, and oil, stuffed with globs of *stracchino*, a young, tangy cow cheese, and baked for an eyeblink in a scalding oven. Recco's bakers aren't worried that anyone outside the town will make it better, because its proprietariness lies in location: If it's not made in Recco, it simply isn't the real thing.

Recco's Festa della Focaccia, held every year on the fourth Sunday in May, celebrates that uniqueness with genuine gusto. In the glaring heat last spring, S. and I found ourselves at the Piazza Nicoloso, which was humming by mid-morning with flea-market stalls, artisan craft tables, and kiosks where local bakeries handed out free slices of their blistered, cheese-weeping focaccia. "If you're going to San Francisco ..." played as I stood in the 500-person-deep line to get a slice from the Tossini kiosk, and a flock of vintage Fiats amassed on the side streets amid focaccia-eating contests. The long lines moved quickly: Everyone was handed a slice and stepped away in a solid flow of people that led, more often than not, to the beach, just



A Ligurian staple: *Trofie al pesto* at the Grand Hotel Miramare's Vistamare.

one street from the plaza and filled with brown bodies. Fugitive scents of rose and flour dust hung in the air.

Luigi Tossini, proprietor of nine bakeries across Liguria (including four separate Tossini establishments in Recco) and something of an Italian focaccia legend, told me his focaccia is like the town itself – synonymous with authority and authenticity. Others were more effusive. In line for a free slice from Moltedo GB Bakery, I asked the man ahead of us what he thought of it all. “In Italy, we say ‘Il piatto parla’ – the dish talks,” he replied. What was the focaccia saying? “It is saying, ‘I saved Recco, now I save you from hunger!’”

It was an oblique reference to World War II, when Recco was obliterated, but flour, oil, and cheese were available, transforming focaccia from a lovely snack into a symbol of fortitude. When I met Lucio Bernini, the festival’s organizer, as he was doling out slices at the kiosk run by the local Focaccia Consortium, he too mentioned those lean years. “The focaccia brought us back from all that,” Bernini said. “It gave us something to rally around, a new people to be.” He placed a small edible-paper disc on a steaming slab of focaccia just pulled from the oven to signify its authenticity. “It’s like a communion wafer,” he said. Before handing me the plate with my slice, he lifted it skyward and, with all the aplomb of a culinary monk, said, “Sacrosanta!”

Born out of frugality, Italian food defies its own simplicity – that’s its power. The festival is a concentration of passion, all whirling heat and laughter, but *focaccia al formaggio* can be bought any day of the week, from Moltedo Bakery or one of the Tossini *panetterie*. There were other, wonderfully simple meals during our Ligurian stay, which we took at a more leisurely pace: a lunch of mussels and margherita pizza at Moby Dick, set back from Rapallo’s waterfront; a



Riviera repose in Santa Margherita Ligure.

full supper of toothsome *trofie* pasta and supple beef at the Grand Hotel Miramare in Santa Margherita Ligure; a late-night meal at Bar Trattoria da Egidio in the tiny village of Ruta, where the ding of a small bell announced the food, a dish of *pansoti con salsa di noci* (ravioli in walnut sauce) and a bottle of Piemonte red. A table of elderly friends laughed heartily, shared massive plates of pasta and prosciutto, and begged for more wine by holding up their glasses and calling out “Scusi!” When they left, each one bid us *buona sera* individually, departing into a night so dark, the lights of the hillside villas seemed to hang on nothing at all. In the morning, the bounty would reveal itself again, in light, color, and a bread that captures it all with heat, glory, and panache.

Linger in Liguria

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STAY The 72-room **Grand Hotel Miramare** is home to one of Santa Margherita Ligure’s top restaurants, Vistamare, focusing on local specialties and produce grown in its extensive garden. As its name suggests, the terrace has an impressive view of the waterfront, which is especially beautiful in the evening. *Virtuoso travelers receive breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

The 119-room **Excelsior Palace Portofino Coast** sits on a curl of rock along the city’s harbor, with light and airy spaces, antique furnishings, and a beach club – accessible via a covered bridge – for unimpeded access to the sea. The ambience conjures up thoughts of Sigmund Freud, Eugenio Montale, and Lord Byron, namesake of one of the hotel’s two restaurants, where the food is divided between *di mare* (of the sea) and *di terra* (of the land). *Virtuoso travelers receive breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

The 52-room **Splendido**, a **Belmond Hotel** organizes private dinners on the terrace overlooking the harbor, romantic meals in the garden, or picnics to bring along on a walk into the hills above Portofino. Its Splendido Grill serves an elaborate menu of Italian delights: oysters, caviar, crudités, and fish from local suppliers. *Virtuoso travelers receive breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.* 📍