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Bellinzona, the capital Ticino, is known for its three medieval castles and weekly market.

## Swiss bliss

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Forget the Alps: Switzerland's little-known Italian canton of Ticino is a foodie paradise

by JOSEPHINE MATYAS • August 2012

It's the food I remember from Ticino. And the people of the region, who manage to seamlessly orchestrate Swiss practicality with *la dolce vita*, the Italian love of the good life. In Ticino — the southern part of Switzerland almost completely hemmed in by Italy — they talk about dinner while they're wiping dry the dishes from lunchtime. That's the way it is.

I was there to eat. Bowls of creamy risotto sprinkled with freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano; tender lamb served with roasted potatoes and zucchini, all drizzled with an aged balsamic vinegar; and fresh pasta tossed with a hearty meat sauce. Food is a religion in this part of Switzerland.

"We eat what we produce here," a waiter explained. "Zero kilometres. We eat meat, cheese, wine, vegetables that are made here."

Geography, as always, plays a part in what flourishes in the soil and makes it onto the dinner plate. The Swiss canton of Ticino is south of the Alps, sitting smack dab in the middle of the continent's temperate zone (equidistant from the North Pole and the Equator). There are gently rolling hillsides, kissed by hours of sunshine and mild temperatures. Ticino's climate is so moderate that it is home to the most northerly rice farm in Europe. Things grow here.

### THAT OLE' CHESTNUT

The farmers are custodians of the countryside. These days it's a good way to make a living. Over the last half-century, the economy has flourished and the quality of life and the variety of products has blossomed. But this is relatively recent history.

"Let's talk a hundred years ago," said guide Donnatella Gerosa. "People here were very, very poor. For six months they relied on chestnuts for food — chestnuts were the bread of the poor." In Ticino, one-fifth of the forests are chestnut trees — one tree produced enough fruit for a person to survive the winter months. At one time, there was a tradition of planting a chestnut tree when a baby was born; this ensured there would always be enough food for everyone in the community.

The Swiss have long memories. They remember — and honour — the chestnuts that kept their forefathers alive. "Drying the nuts conserved the fruit for several months. They were then cooked or ground to make flour," explained Gerosa. "Every fall the people of this region

### MOUNTAIN BOUND



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Air Canada (tel: 888-247-2262; [aircanada.com](http://aircanada.com)) and Swiss (tel: 877-359-7947; [swiss.com](http://swiss.com)) fly into Zurich and Geneva.

Switzerland has one of the best public transportation services in the world. The **Swiss Pass** ([SwissTravelSystem.com](http://SwissTravelSystem.com)) allows travellers to hop on and off 20,000 kilometres of train, bus and boat routes.

In addition to the small, upscale inn at **Fattoria L'Amorosa** (see main text for details) with its 10 rooms overlooking olive groves and vineyards, try **Vallombrosa B&B** (*Castelrotto*; [vallombrosa.ch](http://vallombrosa.ch)) in the Tresa Valley. The B&B is part of a renovated vineyard estate that still produces almost 100,000 bottles a year and close to markets and hiking paths; as well as mountain bikes for guests to use.

For more on travel to the region, including information about the numerous festivals, consult **Switzerland Tourism** ([myswitzerland.com](http://myswitzerland.com)) and **Ticino.ch**.

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commemorate the heritage of the chestnuts. They build a fire in this small stone building — the grà — and lay the chestnuts on racks to dry. The fire burns for three weeks, the time it takes to dry one load of chestnuts. It's a tradition they keep."

The grà is just one stop along the 15-kilometre Chestnut Path (Sentiero del Castagno), a signed trail that cuts through countryside forest groves, shares pathways with herds of free range goats, and crosses through five scenic villages. The tradition of the chestnuts runs deep; some of these trees were seedlings long before the Great War. Not bad for a lowly nut encased in a prickly burr.

## OVER THE HILL

In the fall months, chestnuts pop up on just about every menu, from soup to sauces, soufflés to desserts. After a couple of hours hiking, the **Grotto Sgambada Restaurant** (6939 Altomalcantone, Arosio; [grottosgambada.ch](http://grottosgambada.ch)) appeared on a hillside at the edge of the forest. More importantly, we were ready for a serious caloric infusion — plates piled high with ribbons of tagliatelle pasta tossed in a spicy sausage sauce may be the best meal I've eaten. Ever.

My hosts were determined to show me that this meal was not a one-off, a fluke, culinary serendipity. Meals like this are akin to a fervent obsession — and they are found all over Ticino. We piled into a car and drove the narrow, twisty road along steep hillsides terraced for crops. The road ended at tiny Sonogno, the car-free hamlet in the Valley Verzasca. Full-time population: 90.

There is nowhere for gastronomic fakes to hide in Sonogno. Not only does everyone know each other, but they grow their gardens together, shop together, cook together and eat together. "This village is really something close to our hearts," explained my host. The homes are traditional-design, many made of impossibly stacked pillars of stone topped with roofs of thick stone slabs. Flowerbeds and vegetable gardens are squeezed into every sliver of soil.

At the cosy **Grotto Redorta Restaurant** (Via Caselle, Sonogno; [grottoiredorta.ch](http://grottoiredorta.ch)), plates kept arriving: charcuterie platters, plates of salty olives, rounds of cheeses, polenta and trays of steaming, cheesy lasagna. In the background were the sounds of cowbells and the quarter-hour ringing of the church chimes. I was eating in a postcard.

In the winter, outsiders come for the skiing, and in the summer for the hiking trails. Year-round, small busloads of tourists arrive to wander through the shops run by the local wool artisans. Almost a quarter of Sonogno's population works shearing sheep, washing, carding and dyeing the wool.

On the streets and in the restaurants I hear mainly Italian. But I'm also told that Sonogno has its own language — a mixture of Latin and Celtic. It's a dying language; but nonetheless, the idea that people actually speak Latin caused me to sit down and absorb the notion (and order another bowl of porcini-studded risotto).

## THE 0-MILE DIET

Time in Sonogno — time everywhere in Ticino — is never enough. No matter how long I lingered in a small village, along a country laneway or wandered through the tidy rows of a vineyard, it was never quite enough. This was certainly true at the romantic country inn, **Fattoria L'Amorosa** (Via Moyar, Sementina-Gudo; [amorosa.ch](http://amorosa.ch)), just a short drive outside of Bellinzona, the capital of the canton.

The inn and restaurant are owned by Angelo Delea, one of Ticino's most prestigious and celebrated vintners. The tentacles of his impressive knowledge stretch from his rolling vineyard laden with plump Merlot grapes (Merlot is the overwhelming grape of choice in Ticino) to groves of olive trees and hedges of fragrant rosemary bushes.

At Fattoria L'Amorosa they produce it all on their home turf: wines, olive oil, balsamic vinegar, grappa, limoncello liqueur and even cuts of beef (likely from the cow I heard mooing at dusk). I was reminded of the no nonsense "zero kilometre" claim.

At the inn's patio restaurant, my waiter brought a succession of ever more interesting dishes. Eating here was like peeling back the layers of an onion — each layer with a beauty of its own and a flavour that sets it apart. Menu choices change daily and dishes are unwaveringly traditional Ticinese. I practically licked the bowl of herb-infused risotto (I admit I've never found a risotto I didn't like) and swooned over tiramisu that should come stamped with an addiction warning.

I had come here to breathe in the soft, fragrant air, to nibble, taste and submit to gastronomic delights. Bowl licking might be involved. I'd come to the right place.

*This article was accurate when it was published. Please confirm rates and details directly with the companies in question.*



## PLACES MENTIONED

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