

## NOTES ON A FIVE DAY TRIP TO PIEMONTE DURING WHITE TRUFFLE SEASON

We have been to Piemonte quite a few times for the white truffle season. It is one of those experiences that any lover of fine dining should experience at least once. Unlike black truffles, the white ones (they sell for about ten times the cost of the black) have a short shelf life, do not travel well, cannot be successfully frozen, and so the best place to experience them is at the source when they are in season in the Alba area of Piemonte. The season varies, but usually starts in about mid-October and runs for a few months.

The scope of these notes will be limited to where we stayed and ate during our five days. Obviously there are many other places to stay and dine which we have done on previous visits, but the intention here is to summarize what was an almost perfect five days from November 3 till November 8.

Arlene and I had never been to Torino so we decided to spend two nights there before setting out to Alba with friends who were flying in from Paris. Our route to Torino from Paris was to take the RER from Denfert-Rochereau to CDG which on the express took only 40 minutes. There are many flights from Paris to Torino. Ours was on Air France, took one hour and arrived on time at 5:30. We then checked into our hotel, the Victoria. We chose it because it has a great location near the wonderful Piazza San Carlo, has a lot of character and was somewhere around \$200 for a very nice room, and it was quiet. Before dinner we had time to take an extensive walk in and around the Piazza San Carlo which is in the heart of the old city; it was most enjoyable.

For our first dinner we went to "Del Cambio" which has been in the Michelin Guide for over fifty years, and it had been highly recommended by several people whose opinions we have a high regard for. It is a beautiful old place with tons of atmosphere. We started with "vitelo tonnato antica" meaning it is in the old style with no mayonnaise. It was good, but nothing special. Our other primi piatti (first plate) was a grey rabbit salad with ricotta cheese; the rabbit is a special breed of rabbit from a town in the hills near Torino called Carmagnola. The rabbit was excellent. Then we each had what we had come to Piemonte for which is tajarin with white truffles. Tajarin is really the Piemontese version of tagliarini, a very thin pasta. I was told on a previous trip by a chef that for a kilo of flour they use 20 whole eggs and an additional four egg yolks. Needless to say this is very rich pasta that has an unmistakable yellow color to it. Our pasta was fair at best and the white truffles were not up to previous experiences. Inexcusably the place ran out of the good rolls to have with our cheese course and substituted white toast that resembled Wonderbread. Probably the best part of the meal was a terrific 2000 Barolo by San Giovanni Alessandria for 70€. Cost of the truffles at most places is 5€ per gram which translates to 143€ per ounce (close to \$200). Here they were 4.90. Service was absolutely terrible and for 274€ it was grossly overpriced. Clearly a place that is existing on its old reputation and a tourist trap that is to be avoided.

The next morning after having breakfast at the hotel we walked the large central market inside and out and enjoyed it very much; of course we are very partial to markets. But this was one of the better ones. The big discovery was finding olive dolci (sweet olives) for the first time outside of Puglia where they are grown. These are olives that do not have to be cured because they do not have the bitterness of all other olives. They can literally be eaten off the tree. We bought a small quantity and they tasted exactly like the ones that we are growing in our olive grove in Napa. This

was quite reassuring in that we now know that they can be grown here and will be identical to the ones from Puglia.

For lunch we went to “Tre Galline” which is in the Michelin Guide. It was recommended by our taxi driver and by everybody at our hotel as having the best authentic Piemontese cooking. I ordered a 50 cl. carafe of Nebbiolo which was undrinkable so I substituted a half bottle of 2005 Prunotto Barbera d’Asti which was fine. Then we each had the tajarin with tartuffi. The Pasta was great, but the truffles only fair. After that we had Bagna Cauda. It had a fabulous sauce and was served in individual pots. The vegetables were red pepper, yellow pepper, endive, potato, onion, cabbage, cardoons, celery, cauliflower, fennel, and carrots. It was really good, but the votive candle that they used never did get the oil hot enough to cook the vegetables. Cost was 68€ service included.

One of the great specialties of Torino is a coffee made with chocolate and cream. We went to the most famous of all the cafes that serve this called “Bichèrin” which was founded in 1763. There are only eight tables so the line is always very long. But tables are turned very quickly and we had a table within ten minutes. It was absolutely fabulous and not too sweet. For two of these coffees the cost was 8€.

Our next stop and one of the main reasons that we went to Torino is the “Museo Egizio” or the Egyptian Museum that has a collection in Europe second only to the Louvre. Their huge collection of Sekhmets was amazing as were the mummies, sarcophagi, and other treasures. This is an extraordinary museum clearly deserving three stars. And it was a fairly short walk from our hotel.

For dinner we went to “Sotto la Mole” which is also in the Michelin Guide. Without wasting any “truffle time” we immediately started with three white truffle dishes. First was fonduta which is a combination of fontina cheese with egg yolks; very rich and difficult to make successfully. Then came the tajarin, and lastly the risotto. Each dish was 25€ with the truffles, and they all deserved a star. The truffles were certainly the best so far. Arlene had a hazelnut torte and I had the cheese plate which had sheep, goat, tomme, a blue from the Haut Savoie, and a sheep cheese rubbed with Nebbiolo. It was an outstanding cheese plate; the place had won a Slow Food prize for their cheese. Our wine was a 1998 Barolo by Mauro Veglio from his Gattera vineyard. I had never heard of Veglio before, but the wine was fantastic and only 40€. Much more about him later. Cost for our feast was 130€, less than half the cost of the famous “Del Cambio” and more than twice as good. The cover charge and service was included in the price. The place was completely full and many people without reservations were turned away. It is a simple, but attractive trattoria with nice posters on the walls, and a very local crowd. Service was excellent and the food was served hot.

The next day, a Sunday, our intention was to go to the Film Museum which is a three star attraction according to Michelin. We walked toward it, but we ran into an interesting antique market. By the time we walked the market which was quite large it was time for lunch so we never got to the Film Museum. I had always thought of Torino as nothing much more than a large industrial city and so we had avoided it for years. But we found the old part to be quite nice and it is a place that we would return to.

For our lunch we took the recommendation of the hotel concierge and went to a very local non-touristy place called “Da Mauro.” They did not take credit cards or reservations, and we got the last table at 12:20. Tables were being turned constantly and the local atmosphere was very inviting. The food was really excellent, especially the agnolotti alla Piemontese that was filled with meat; they looked more like ravioli to me. In any event they were superb. So was the artichoke salad with shaved pieces of Parmesan cheese. The risotto with tomatoes and the broccoli were very good. The fried calamari were not good. With a half bottle of Barbaresco for 10€ our lunch was 55€. This place was so simple and local that they did not even have white truffles. Unfortunately I don’t have an address, but I am sure that it could be easily found due to its great popularity.

We met our friends at the Torino airport and drove to “Locanda del Pilone” where we stayed for the next three nights; I had found it in the Michelin Red Guide. It is located about five kilometers outside of Alba in the countryside, and has only six rooms.. We all loved the place and the lady manager was unusually helpful and gracious. Its country setting was very quiet and tranquil and at 200€ for a Junior Suite it was very fairly priced. One of the reasons that we chose it was because it is a one star restaurant that is open on Sunday night. When we return to Alba, which I am sure we will, I would definitely stay here again. The only problem is that it is very difficult to find, especially after dark. We finally had to call them and ask if they could send a car to the train station to escort us to the restaurant. The guy drove so fast that we lost him and ended up following the wrong car that drove and stopped in a field. It was quite embarrassing and maybe even dangerous. But the men were not drug dealers, and they gave us directions to the Locanda, but we still could not find it. Finally a second car was sent to escort us and we were successful in following him to our destination.

Dinner started with two canapés, cheese with truffles and rabbit liver, also with truffles. For antipasto the four of us shared two orders of ravioli stuffed with quail and white truffles; a wonderful dish. Then three of us had the tajarin with tartuffi and one had the fonduta with tartuffi. The truffles served here were the best we had so far. Lastly the four of us shared two orders of pigeon with truffles; this dish was not nearly as successful as the rest of the dinner. Our hostess thought it would be a good idea to have two Barolos, since that was our main interest in wine. One modern style and one traditional. The modern one was a 1996 Barolo Rocche by Brovia for 50€ and the traditional was also a Barolo Rocche 1997 by Mauro Veglio in the Annunziata section of the wonderful town of La Morra for 60€. Both were superb, but the Mauro Veglio was outstanding. The men each had a great Beppino grappa. This was a terrific dinner with truffles galore of excellent quality. Cost per couple was 268€, hardly a bargain, but a wonderful evening. The cost of the truffles per couple was 140€ or more than half the cost of the entire dinner.

The next morning, after a very nice breakfast at the hotel, we drove through some towns including Nieve and Barbaresco. After some tasting in Barbaresco we had lunch, at the suggestion of our hostess at Locanda del Pilone, at “Ristorante Antine.” Lunch started with a wonderful canapés—calamari with pepper and tomato. For antipasti we all had rabbit marinated in olive oil with mushrooms and Parmesan cheese that was delicious. Then we all ordered “Tajarin tradizionale al coltello saltidi con burro di Montagne e tartuffo bianco.” I gave the dish two stars, and it was clearly the best truffles and pasta so far. Our wine was a 1996 Martinenga Barbaresco by

Marchesi de Gresy for 55€ and it was superb. We all had coffee and with it came a huge plate of “piccolo pasiccheria” which I am used to calling mignardises.

This was really a fabulous lunch and the cost per couple was 119€. It is also a one star restaurant and is listed in the Michelin Guide.

For dinner we went to another Michelin one star in Treiso called “La Ciau del Tornavento.” After a nice plate of five canapés we started with a risotto with sweet gorgonzola and truffles. It was outstanding and worth two stars. There was also a cardoon fonduta that was not distinguished. Then came four orders of “tajarin con tartuffi” and this version of our favorite item in Piemonte was as good or better than the one at Antine for lunch. Sticking with our theme of truffles and Barolo we had two Barolos. The first was a 1997 by Enzo Baglietti for 70€; I gave it a star and a half. The second was one that I was quite familiar with from earlier vintages and it had sort of become the Barolo standard for me. It was the 2000 Barolo Cascina Francia by Giacomo Conterno for 100€ and it did not disappoint at all; worth at least two stars. The men had two great grappas. Cost per couple was 300€, but it was another great feast of truffles and Barolo which is why we took the trip.

The next morning we had another terrific breakfast at the hotel. They serve great hams, salami, cheeses, pastries, etc. For lunch we went to a place about two kilometers out of Monforte d’Alba (also in the Michelin Guide) called “Ristorante Trattoria Della Posta.” The canapé was a terrific mix of porcini mushrooms, tomato and olive oil. We tried some different dishes here so for the first time we did not have the taglierini with truffles. Instead we had a baked porcini mushroom dish with truffles that was fabulous and deserving of two stars. We also tried the agnolotti with butter and truffles, but that was just fair. The rabbit with porcinis was excellent and the surprise winner was the veal with a hollandaise sauce that also rated two stars. The 2004 Barbera d’Alba from the Ceretto vineyard by Roberto Voerzio for 26€ was exceptional. Coffee and some grappa rounded out this wonderful lunch. Cost was 147€ per couple.

We had been very impressed with the Barolos of Mauro Veglio so we decided to try visiting the winery. It was not easy to find, but we eventually did find him in the Annunziata section of La Morra. His wife did a tasting of eight wines for us including Barolos and Barberas and it was most impressive. We were able to find the Barolos when we got home and both couples stocked up on the 2000 and 2001 vintages. Veglio’s wines are usually made in the traditional style and both vintages, especially the 2001 need several more years in the bottle. They are really worth seeking out. Although the winery is quite small he seems to have fairly good distribution in the U.S.

Another winery we visited in the Vietti Winery in Castiglione Falletto; it is owned by the Currado family. We have known Luciana (she is a Vietti) and Alfredo Currado for many years and also their son Luca who now has taken over the winemaking. All of their wines are excellent, especially the Arneis, the Barberas and of course the Barolos. We were fortunate in that Luciana and Alfredo are usually on vacation at this time of the year, but they had not left yet so Luciana took us on a tour of the facilities. Then we tasted quite a few wines, and liked them all. Besides the Barolos they make outstanding Barberas. The Barbera d’Alba from the Scarrone Vineyard is particularly excellent. It is fine when it is young, but ages extremely well. I rarely buy wine by the case anymore, but for this wine I make an exception and get a case every good year.

In April of 1989 Arlene and I went to a restaurant in Isola d’Asti called “Il Cascinalenuova” on

a rainy Sunday for lunch. It had no stars, but had been recommended by a food writer friend of ours. From the outside it was rather unattractive and reminded me of an office building in Concord, CA. I said I wasn't going. Arlene pointed out that it was too late to try and go somewhere else. She was of course right. The menu was a huge prix fixe with no choices, and we were looking for a light lunch. The owners, the Fereretto brothers, were most accommodating and said that we could have one lunch for the two of us and they would split each course. Well, it was one of the best meals we had ever had in Italy. It was so good that we went for lunch the next day. Since we had already had the menu they served us a completely different prix fixe and it was equal to the previous day. When we got home I wrote a long detailed letter to Michelin recommending at least one star for this amazing place. They did get their star the next year and still have it. We have been several more times over the years and it has always been outstanding. So it seemed appropriate to go there for our last dinner in Piemonte. The place is now very attractive, somewhat formal, and contemporary and they have added fifteen rooms which are nice and quite inexpensive. After a nice canapé we had a fabulous pumpkin risotto with Parmesan tuiles. Then two of us had an autumn vegetable tart with fonduta and truffles that also deserved two stars. The agnolotti with a meat filling and truffles was still another two star dish. One of us had eggs with porcini and another had the pigeon. They were good, but not as outstanding as the other items. Our first wine was a 2003 Barbera Vigneto Gallina and the second was a 1997 Barolo Colonello by Aldo Conterno for 80€ that was exceptional. We finished with coffee and grappa. Cost was 232€ for a fabulous dinner. I will certainly return if I am anywhere near Alba. The next day we did some shopping in Alba which is a great place to shop if you are looking for interesting fine food such as dried porcini mushrooms and white truffles that you can take home. On the way to the airport we had lunch at the very nice "Trattoria Del Angelo" in Leini which is close to the airport. Our plane landed in Paris at 6:00 PM with a flight time of only an hour and ten minutes, but it took us an hour and a half by RER to get from CDG to the apartment where we were staying in Paris.

Our goal for this trip was to eat tartuffi bianchi and drink good wines, especially Barolo. I would say that we succeeded spectacularly.