



# Italy



## “Cortina d’Ampezzo 1956, Rome 1960” “SPAGHETTI ALLA...”



While the Winter Games in Cortina d’Ampezzo in 1956 coincided with the years of post-war reconstruction, the Summer Games in Rome in 1960 opened Italy to the world again and ushered it into a decade of booming prosperity- in the legendary ‘sixties. In the all-encompassing cultural explosion that was taking place, cooking was part and parcel of a transformation which not only set the trend for future culinary fashions but also shaped the healthy habits which in the coming decades would accompany advances in sport and athletics.

### CORTINA D’AMPEZZO 1956

Ovomaltine, orange squash, tea and hot chocolate. Italy had not yet reached the era of “salt restorers”, and when people spoke of high-calorie food they were referring to polenta with pork chops or sauerkraut and sausages. It was the winter of 1956, the winter which brought so much snow to all of Italy. It was the first real winter - the first happy winter - in the post-war country. Along the long-distance race courses, at the finish lines of the Alpine trials. in the ice skating rinks. and at the foot of the ski jumps, coffee with sugar, oranges. apples, mineral water, dextrose and. especially, rolls filled with bacon were always available. Elsewhere. loin of venison, *casunzie all’ampezzana* and delicious ravioli with red turnips were the delicacies served at the parties and receptions hosted by Countess Marisa Bona-

by Franco Fava



cossa, who ran the “ladies’ committee“ which was set up so that the illustrious wives of prominent international figures would have a more pleasant stay in Cortina d’Ampezzo. Countess Bonacossa’s “ladies’ committee“ was based at the Artists’ Circle of Cortina, whose exhibitions were always well attended by IOC members and by President Brundage himself. The committee included the ladies of the best *cortinese* families and villa owners in Cortina who competed to organize the most succulent

*The Village refectory.*



and memorable dinners in their private homes, which were reserved for the consorts and daughters of the Olympic and international leaders attending the Games. The actress Sophia Loren was also present at one of these dinners. From the Alpine huts of Zuel and Misurina to the warm and cosy restaurants and taverns of the Miramonti or the Cristallo hotel, there was an abundance of dishes from the rich Dolomite cooking tradition. Crème brûlée, polenta with game, ricotta orecchioni with poppy seeds. liver *alla Veneta* and potato pappardelle with a plentiful flow of red wine and spirits were the dishes reserved for the “élite” of Ampezzo. But the food for the thousand or so athletes was not bad, either. Cortina’s well-earned reputation for hospitality was amply reconfirmed during the days of the Olympics, where the tables were always bountifully laid with traditional fare, never neglecting to cater to national eating habits and the needs of athletic activity. When the USSR team was offered alternative accommodations at the Passo Tre

Croci Hotel, the delegation readily accepted the transfer, despite the fact that the new address was somewhat out-of-the-way compared with their first hotel. To nip any dispute in the bud, the owner, Mr Otto Menardi, had promised the Soviet athletes excellent and abundant meals - the best of the local culinary tradition. At the Alpi Hotel, saunas were installed for the Finnish athletes but they were not satisfied until a copious daily supply was guaranteed of high-fat milk. Of course, reindeer

milk was not available, but in the end the cow milk substitute proved an excellent replacement.

Sausages, sauerkraut and potatoes. Some guests even ate them for breakfast before hitting the slopes. Such people were known as *langlaufers*, ignorant of the refined nutritional methods used today. By contrast, Toni Sailer, the twenty-year-old Austrian slalom racer from Kitzbühel who won three medals in Cortina, preferred to keep his meals light. Nevertheless, in the evening Sailer's favourite dish was pancakes with sausage and polenta bathed in sauce. Swedish athlete Sixton Jernberg (gold in the 50 km, silver in the 15 km and 30 km and bronze in the relay) was in his own way a forerunner of the carefully tailored diets of today. In the morning, he had tea, fruit with toast and marmalade; at lunch time, a starchy food such as plain pasta or yellow polenta without sauce; and in the evening he allowed himself some "eating freedom" with a glass of white wine. Among all the athletes, however; the favourite snack was simple yet wholesome bread and ham, a combination which is still part of a typical athlete's diet today.

But Cortina was also famous for its Olympia restaurants, the management of which was entrusted to third parties not involved in the organization. However, when the Games were over, it turned out that the Olympia restaurants had been a financial failure, falling very short of the huge investment made. Three main cooking stations were set up where meals were prepared for consumption in the dozens of meal stations



*Bon appétit!*

situated in Cortina and in the areas surrounding the competition venues. The idea of the Olympia restaurants, which also supplied mobile refreshment stations, was to offer hot meals and fast service at low prices. Very quickly, however, it became clear that spectators, tourists and even the employees and athletes, preferred to spend extra time in the taverns and restaurants, which had their best fare on offer, from the cuisine of the South Tyrol to that of Vicenza and even of Venice, whose Lagoon is little more than 150 kilometres from Cortina. The Olympia refectories were not an irresistible attraction, perhaps also in part because the prices were somewhat high for the time (a meal with service ranged from 1,000 to 1,300 lire, equivalent to 0.9-1.15 Swiss francs, while a meal at the bar cost 600

lire, or 0.5 Swiss francs, with a supplement for mineral water of 50 lire or 4 Swiss centimes). They certainly did poorly in terms of the quality of the cuisine, and the food in the traditional restaurants and taverns was preferred by many.

### **ROME 1960**

Four years later, Rome did not repeat the mistakes made in Cortina. How could it? The capital city was used to welcoming tourists from all around the world and above all to satisfying the most discriminating palates. Ten years earlier, in 1950, there had already been enormous crowds for the Holy Year, which drew throngs of pilgrims from all around the world to the Eternal City. There was therefore no need to set up mobile refreshment units. The city

was already equipped with a rich, long-standing gastronomic tradition which reflects the very history of Rome and the Romans, since it has for centuries evolved with the art and culture of a people which believes that all aspects of life are more enjoyable in front of a well-stocked table.

But it was the Olympics and the boom in social, cultural and sporting activities which spawned the opening in Rome of large new restaurants and the rediscovery of old ones. In the early 'sixties in Rome you could still see *fagottari* as they were known: entire families who





*Too many cooks?*

went on Sunday outings to picnic areas that were set up along the main Rome-bound roads. Here, home-cooked meals could be brought out in *fagotti*, or bundles, and eaten.

From Sora Lolla in Trastevere, named after the sister of the late actor Aldo Fabrizi (this famous *trattoria* on Tiberine Island on the Tiber River opened the year before the Rome Olympics with a festival of spring lamb, tripe and gnocchi *all'amatriciana*), to Checchino al Testaccio, every quarter in Rome discovered aspirations and fantasies in cooking, as businesses that were little more than family affairs opened or transformed themselves. like the old inns or wine cellars that operated very much like proper restaurants. The kitchens and cellars of the Castelli in the region

connecting Marino, Frascati and Castel Gandolfo, and home to the lake where the Olympic rowing and canoeing events took place. hosted veritable pagan feasts. The Tuscolo restaurant, run by the sporting Blasi brothers who were the owners of a cycling team. began in 1960 to hold a banquet every 14th November by invitation at which each guest assigned his or her name to a barrel of wine. On the night of the banquet, the wine literally flowed in rivers in the cellars of the Tuscolo and the tables were laden with delicacies of game and mushrooms and sweets made with chestnuts (mushrooms and chestnuts are local products).

Of course, the concept of the "Mediterranean diet" had not yet been introduced, and only a few people had

heard of Gualtiero Marchesi, who first brought the vague notion of "nouvelle cuisine" to Italy. There was absolutely no mention of "Mediterranean" cuisine. or of carbohydrate-based diets. In the ten restaurants at the Athletes' Village. more pork (31,300 kg) than pasta (only 13,618 kg) was consumed. It is curious to observe that in the official report on the 1960 Olympics, the Italians themselves referred to dry pasta as "macaroni". The "spaghetti parties" thrown around the time of the marathon were not introduced until the 'eighties. The Italians are a people who love "macaroni" with a passion, and for this reason the organizers tried harder than necessary to diversify the food on offer to satisfy the tastes and needs of thousands of athletes. coaches and officials. In nine

restaurants. menus were served according to geographical area: hence food for the British, Irish, Canadians and Americans was contained in a single menu in restaurant number 1, while the Argentinians, Mexicans, Spaniards and Uruguayans together with the Brazilians, Chileans, Colombians, Cubans, Peruvians, Puerto Ricans,



*A self-service counter...*

Venezuelans and Portuguese were treated to traditional Latino/Ibero-American dishes. Poland was grouped with Scandinavia, but it is not clear why Ghana was paired with Iraq and Iran.

During the Games, thousands of packed meals were also consumed; these were cold meals which athletes and coaches took with them in the morning when they were going to be out all day competing or training. They- almost always included cold pasta or rice with a roast chicken quarter or roast beef, an apple and a banana. 40,052 kg of bananas were consumed during the Games but,

since it was grape season, more of this fruit (no less than 66,292 kg) was consumed than any other food in the Olympic Village cafeterias. More potatoes were consumed than tomatoes: 60,940 kg of the former versus 21,987 kg of the latter. Only two servings of candied fruit were consumed, compared with 127,000 ice creams and 44,640 Sicilian *cassatas* which, it is reported, were a special favourite among athletes competing in the strength disciplines.

*... at the Olympic Village restaurant in Rome.*



Rome 1960 was a truly open Olympics, even from a culinary point of view. If the dishes in the Village refectories did not meet with the athletes' liking, in the city, guests were spoiled for choice. It was the rather curious total absence of red wine in the Village that led Livio Berruti (gold in the 200 m) to go and explore Roman *trattorias* and inns in search of the famous Castelli wines and the traditional old Roman dishes, although these did not generally make a suitable diet for an athlete.

Diners always leave Checco e Carrettiere, a restaurant in Trastevere which still uses recipes from nineteenth-century Roman cuisine, with sauce stains on their ties. Fortunately, the sprinter from Piedmont who is said to have sampled some of Checco's excellent dishes in the company of Wilma Rudolph (the "black gazelle" at the Games in Rome, who won the 100 m, the 200 m and a bronze in the 4 x 100 m) was not wearing a tie on that September evening. Romance seemed to be in the air, and whether the stories are true or not, several restaurants have told similar tales. *Bucatini alla carbonara* and *Coda alla vaccinara* were, and still are, the famous restaurant's great dishes. Its walls are decorated with photos of celebrities from the 1960s such as film stars Elizabeth Taylor and Robert Mitchum. Accustomed to Barolo and Nebbiolo, Berruti also acquired a taste for the reds of Latium and the dry whites of Frascati and Montefiascone. Wilma Rudolph was ecstatic about them, as she recalled when she returned to Rome a quarter of a century later to take part in a series of celebrations.

When Abebe Bikila made everybody's chin drop by winning the marathon in bare feet by torch light under the Constantine Arch, the Addis Ababa restaurant on Via Portuense in Rome had changed its name. In the early 'forties, Mussolini had gone there occasionally to eat spring lamb *scottadito* (barbecued) and chick pea soup. The restaurant is called La Lupa today. In the '50s, Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn had



whizzed through the streets of Rome on a Lambretta (a famous scooter model at the time) in the film *Roman Holiday*. In the evening, the pair had been regular customers at the Taverna Flavia. The *bucatini* with cheese and pepper and the gnocchi, served every Thursday without fail, were their favourite dishes. The athletes of the '60s did not set their sights so high, however. A quick visit to the city centre when competition or training allowed gave them time to eat at the "Enotecantina" on the Via della Croce, one of the oldest refectories in the capital, where popular dishes such as beans *all'uccelletto* and polenta with offcuts were served. Today, one finds these meals have been traded in for more refined dishes, such as lobster *alla catalana* and even oysters.

The American Harold Connolly (gold in the hammer throw in Melbourne in 1956) and the Czechoslovakian Olga Fikotova (gold in the discus throw in Melbourne in 1956) did not achieve the same results in Rome in 1960, but the pair found love in the Italian capital. One evening, after a leisurely stroll around the Piazza Navona in a horse-drawn carriage, they were dropped off at Al Bersagliere on the Via Ancona, a restaurant specializing in the cuisine of Rome and the Abruzzi, in which the main ingredients are game and black truffles. It was here that many years later the great film director Federico Fellini ate his last meal together with his wife and muse Giulietta Masina.

With gnocchi (small potato pillows served with spicy sauces) on Thursdays and tripe (the tender lining of a calf's stomach) on Saturdays, the days of the week in Rome have always had their special meal. Rosati on the Piazza del Popolo was a popular place for drinks, while the Via Margutta was artists' - but also athletes' - territory, thanks to the Gabrielli brothers who were all devoted followers of the faith of rugby. Their father had started in the '20s by restoring the Grotto del Piccione on Via Aurelia and his son Piero later created the mag-

nificent Osteria Margutta, which is very popular with artists, painters, sportsmen and -women, although not necessarily with rugby champions.

Famous the world over, fettuccini Alfredo had its international launch around 1960 or 1962 thanks to Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. The Hollywood couple so loved the famous fettuccini that they gave the legendary Alfredo a set of gold cutlery. Today, the restaurant on the Piazza Augusto Imperatore, run by Alfredo III, is called Alfredo alle Posate d'Oro ("Alfredo of the Gold Cutlery"). It is even said that at the time of his first major boxing victory - the Olympic gold medal in Rome - Cassius Clay raved about the "triple-butter fettuccini" at... Alfredo's.

### A typical recipe from Cortina 1956

#### Polenta with pork chops

Ingredients: (serves six)  
500 g corn meal (maize)  
1.5 litres salted water  
1 kg pork chops  
one tin tomato purée  
1 chopped onion  
1 chopped celery stalk  
1 chopped carrot  
1 bunch parsley  
100 g streaky bacon  
50 g grated parmesan  
half a glass of oil

Prepare the polenta by sprinkling the maize meal into the boiling salted water and stirring continuously with a wooden spoon for about half an hour. Keep the polenta hot. Mix together the chopped bacon, onion, celery, carrot and parsley. Lightly brown in a pan with the oil, add the chops and sauté over medium-low heat. Add the tomato purée and 1/2 glass salted water, cover and allow to cook gently. When the sauce has thickened, remove the chops, place them in a bowl and remove the bones. Slice the meat and return it to the pan. Serve the chops and sauce over the polenta and sprinkle with parmesan.

### Some famous recipes from Rome 1960

#### Spaguetti alla Carbonara (serves six)

Ingredients:

600 g spaghetti

3 eggs

200 g diced bacon

30 g butter

50 g grated Parmesan

1 onion, finely chopped  
parsley, pepper and white wine  
(half a glass)

In a small pan, brown the chopped onion and diced bacon in the butter. Pour in the white wine and allow it to evaporate slowly. Lightly beat the eggs in a bowl and blend in the grated parmesan, the chopped parsley and the pepper. Cook the pasta al dente, drain, and place in the bowl with the eggs; mix well and sprinkle the hot bacon over the pasta.

#### Oxtail alla Vaccinara (serves six)

Ingredients:

1.5 kg oxtail and cheek

one spoonful lard

bacon fat

1 chopped onion

minced garlic to taste

1 chopped yellow carrot

parsley

salt, pepper

one glass dry red wine

2-3 spoonfuls tomato purée

celery stalks

Cut the tail and cheeks into equal sized pieces. Prepare a paste with the bacon fat, chopped onion, garlic, yellow carrot and parsley. Melt the lard in a heavy stew pot and stir in the paste; sauté over low heat until tender and add the meat. Season with salt and pepper and cook until the meat is a dark gold colour. Pour in the glass of dry red wine and when it has evaporated, add the tomato sauce. Add enough boiling water to cover the meat, lower the heat and let simmer very slowly with the lid on. Leave the celery aside, cut into 6-7 cm pieces, and add when the meat is almost done. Entire cooking time is around six hours. At the end, the sauce should be dark, thick and savoury.