



A TASTE OF TICINO

BY ZAC STEGER





Savoring Switzerland's "Dolce Vita."

After two trips that took me through some of the best of German-speaking Switzerland, I was beginning to think I had the Swiss figured out – their food, their language, even their somewhat devious devotion to timeliness. Then I discovered Ticino.

From the Lake Lucerne region it is just a scenic two-hour train ride on the Wilhelm Tell Express (note: “Express” often means slow in Switzerland!) down to one of the most beautiful – and delicious – parts of this southernmost canton, Lake Maggiore. So, we hopped on board for a taste of “La Dolce Vita” Swiss style.

As our train moved in a not entirely express-like manner through the Gotthard Pass, the landscape was dramatic. The waterfalls from melting glaciers, jagged cliffs, and giant gorges were captivating. Then suddenly, the churches and small houses that dotted the valley were made from rugged looking stones. Soon enough we would pass the massive fortresses of Bellinzona on the horizon.

At the edge of the sun-drenched valleys along the shimmering Lake Maggiore, alpine peaks give way to piazzas and palm trees in the neighboring towns of Ascona and Locarno. The region is a culinary and cultural treasure chest in Switzerland’s own little Garden of Eden, just waiting to be eaten up by curious travelers.

A bright Ticino sun greeted us upon arrival in Locarno, the largest city on the lake, and frankly, I was ready to eat. Risotto, polenta, pasta, cheese, and gelato were just a few things on my mind. However, before getting a taste of the region’s famous gastronomy, we took a quick tour of the town to soak up the Italian-style architecture and Mediterranean atmosphere.

Immediately outside the train station I was struck by the Italian flavor. Palm leaves, a cactus, even the Lindt shop promoted “La Squissita Cioccolata.” Throughout the en-

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP LEFT: ITALIAN STYLE ARCHITECTURE ALONG LOCARNO'S PIAZZA GRANDE.

TOP RIGHT: GETTING LOST AMONG ASCONA'S WINDING WAYS IS ONE OF THE GREAT PLEASURES.

MIDDLE LEFT: HIDDEN AMONG ASCONA'S WINDING ALLEYS IS A PLETHORA OF BEAUTIFUL ARCHITECTURE, INCLUDING THIS ORNATELY DESIGNED HOUSE.

MIDDLE RIGHT: PATRICIAN HOUSES

ALONG LOCARNO'S PIAZZA GRANDE. BOTTOM LEFT: NIGHTTIME VIEW OF ASCONA. BOTTOM RIGHT: LOCARNO'S VISCONTEO CASTLE DATES BACK TO THE TWELFTH-CENTURY, THOUGH MOST OF WHAT REMAINS IS FROM FIFTEENTH-CENTURY WORK. IT IS BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN DESIGNED BY LEONARDO DA VINCI. ABOVE TOP: INTERIOR PAINTINGS AND STUCCO WORK WITH CHERUBS IN THE SANTA MARIA ASSUNTA, LOCARNO. BOTTOM RIGHT: A LARGE STUCCO FIGURE OF ST. CHRISTOPHER OUTSIDE THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SANTA MARIA ASSUNTA IN LOCARNO, ALSO KNOWN AS THE NEW CHURCH (CHIESA NUOVA). THE INSIDE IS DECORATED WITH ELABORATE STUCCOS AND PAINTINGS.



VIEW OF THE ASCONA'S
LAKEFRONT PROMENADE.



chanting old town the vibrant orange, yellow, and magenta colored buildings and narrow alleys remind us that this is not Heidi's Switzerland.

Locarno's main square, the Piazza Grande, is surrounded by patrician houses and arcades reminding us of the city's one time wealth. It is also the site of the city's two major summer events, the Moon and Stars music festival each July (attracting acts like R.E.M. and Lenny Kravitz) and the eleven-day International Film Festival each August.

Among the many architectural treasures is Visconteo Castle, a Renaissance fortification with origins dating back to the twelfth century. Though only a fifth of the original structure remains, it's an attention-grabbing structure that features a museum of medieval glassware and numerous Bronze Age and Roman archaeological finds from the area. Recent speculation indicates the castle may have been designed by Leonardo da Vinci.

Near a small piazza, a large stucco figure of St. Christopher guards the seventeenth-century Santa Maria Assunta, commonly known as The New Church (Chiesa Nuova). We dropped in for a quick view, marveling at the incredible stucco cherubs and stunning paintings across the ceiling.

Ascona, the picturesque "Pearl of the Maggiore," is the smaller and more charming of the two towns. Its lakeside promenade, boutique shops, galleries, and fantastic restaurants make it the best place to call home for a couple days in the region. And with a balcony overlooking the lake, my room at the new Hotel Carcani couldn't have been better.

Gastronomy is one of the major reasons visitors come to Ticino. Its notable Slow Food movement and regional specialties are sure to delight any palate. In the small Café Carcani, the meal included a selection of Italian tapas served in little jars, including Italian meats, salmon, and avocado mousse. Afterwards we enjoyed the main course, the area's famous risotto.

Yes, believe it or not, rice grows in Switzerland. In Ascona, the Terreni alla Maggia farm is said to have Europe's northernmost rice plantation, producing around four hundred tons of raw rice annually. As I learned from our guide, Margrit Thiele, the alluvial land of the River Maggia, with sand, clay, and granite, provides the perfect

conditions for growing rice. Unlike in Asia, however, the Loto rice variety found here is not submerged in water, but simply watered as needed.

However, Terreni alla Maggia is not limited to rice. Today it produces organic fruits, vegetables, and pasta, and also raises poultry, with many products sent to the best local gourmet restaurants. It also produces wine and is the only place in Switzerland where whisky is made, providing visitors with a unique one-stop shop for local goods.

Today Ticino's wines receive acclaim at home and abroad, but there was a time when production almost ceased. Vineyards throughout the region were devastated by a nineteenth-century plague, but the introduction of disease-resistant Merlot vines from Bordeaux revived the wine industry. Like most Swiss wines, however, you are unlikely to find these in North America. All the more reason to drink at the source!

Dining in Ticino should include a visit to a traditional Ticinese grotto, such as Grotto Brogginini in nearby Losone. Though the definition is a little more relaxed these days (they are not typically in caves), the grottos offer a cool shaded area, often under chestnut trees, to enjoy local cuisine at granite tables and benches.

At Grotto Brogginini, local cheese and olives made the rounds before we indulged in their signature wood-fired chicken and a side of polenta.

Following lunch we headed deep into the Valle Onsernone, one of many valleys in Ticino. After a long, slightly nauseating drive up steep mountainsides, we came to a small village, guarded by an army of lawn gnomes. Here we met our guide, a Belgian transplant, for an hour-long hike through the rugged mountainside.

Thin trails took us past small streams and dilapidated stone houses, a glimpse into what must have been a difficult existence. Finally we came to Loco, where we would meet with Ilario Garbani at the restored mill where he produces the traditional Farina Bona, a finely ground toasted corn flour.

Once part of the everyday diet in the Valle Onsernone, Farina Bona was mixed with water, milk, and even wine in a variety of recipes. After World War II, eating habits changed



WOOD-FIRED CHICKEN ON A SPLIT IS A SPECIALTY AT GROTTO BROGGINI IN LOSONE.



TENDING TO THE GRAPES AT TERRENI ALLA MAGGIA.



REGIONAL CHEESE AND OLIVES AT GROTTO BROGGINI IN LOSONE.



PIZZA WITH LOCAL MEAT AND CHEESE TOPPED WITH ARUGULA AT AL PIAZZA.

and many in the poor valleys left. After the last two millers of the valley retired in the sixties, production ended.

Farina Bona, meaning “good flour,” only survived thanks to a few family recipes that had been passed down. Efforts to revive Farina Bona began in the 1990s and it was mentioned in the Ark of Taste of Slow Food in 2001, gradually expanding its appeal beyond Ticino and the Swiss borders.

On the day we visited, toasting and milling was temporarily taking place on the lower level of a tiny village grocery while additional work was being done to the historic mill across the street.

So what is Farina Bona used in today? In Loco there was soup, ice cream, and a delicious, creamy Nutella-like spread called Bonella. Unfortunately, my own take home jar was confiscated by airport security in Sweden a few days later. If you are not up for the trip into the remote parts of the valley, you can now find the flour in the COOP grocery chain across Switzerland and find

recipes online.

Any Italian experience would be incomplete without pizza, even in Switzerland. So, for the final meal in Ticino I indulged in a properly made pie at Al Piazza in Ascona, complemented by more wine, a lakeside view, and a gentle breeze.

The next morning I enjoyed one last giggle at the Locarno FART station (that is *Ferrovie Autolinee Regionali Ticinesi*) before heading off to explore the French-speaking Valais region on my own, crossing through Italy on the Centovalli Express train.

As the train slowly chugged through the extraordinary landscape, I had to wonder why the Swiss liked to use the term “express” so very loosely. However, I already had the answer. In Ticino, just as the sun shines a little brighter, everything moves just a little slower, and that is just fine by me.

As for the food, you will just have to taste of Ticino for yourself. **GL**

The Way

Air: SWISS flies directly to Zürich through several gateway cities, including Boston, New York JFK, Chicago, and Los Angeles. www.swiss.com

Rail: From Zürich, trains run hourly with changes in Bellinzona and direct to Locarno several times a day. Both take around three hours.

From Milan, trains run to Locarno via Bellinzona in just over two hours.

Bus travel is required to Ascona and into the valleys. www.sbb.ch

The Hotel

Hotel Café Carcani
Piazza Giuseppe Motta
6612 Ascona
www.carcani.ch

The Food

Terreni all Maggia
Via Muraccio 105
6612 Ascona
www.terreniallamaggia.ch

Ristorante e pizzeria Al Piazza
Piazza Giuseppe Motta 29
6612 Ascona
www.alpiazza.ch

Grotto Broggin
Via San Materno 18
6616 Losone
www.ristoranti-ff.ch

Farina Bona
www.farinabona.ch

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