

Italy: Taking a meal to new heights

By Suzanne Morphet

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Before even lacing my hiking boots I was anticipating lunch. It would be knuckle of pork in honey and pepper with thyme-seasoned polenta and chanterelles, washed down with a glass of pinot nero.

I was in Italy's Dolomite mountains and taking advantage of the many mountain rifugi (refuges) that offer hikers a meal worth climbing for.

"People hike to eat here," mountain guide Marcello Cominetti confirmed when we sat down to a plate of home-made ravioli stuffed with cheese and speck – the local prosciutto-style ham – in a mountain hut above Cortina d'Ampezzo in northern Italy.

Last summer the tourism office in Alta Badia, one valley over from Cortina, raised the gastronomic bar another notch by pairing eight Michelin-star chefs with eight different mountain rifugi.

Each chef was tasked with preparing a menu using at least one ingredient from the South Tyrol region. The meal I was particularly looking forward to had been designed by Arturo Spicocchi, a one-star Michelin chef who runs the kitchen at Stua de Michil in Corvara, the village where Italy's first chairlift was built in 1947.

And since the day was going to be hot – the thermometer climbed above 30C every day during my eight-day visit in July – I opted to take the chairlift most of the way up the mountain. I would do my hiking after lunch.

Speaking of chair lifts, they – along with public buses, well marked trails, good maps and now the Peaks of Gastronomy programme – make it easy to hike and eat well in and around the Alta Badia valley without the need for a car or even a guide.

However, a guide can save you time in pre-trip planning and direct you to the best routes and rifugi. I used Dolomite Mountains, a local company whose owner speaks good English, to book a five-day climbing tour, then hiked on my own for another two days.

The first mountain hut I visited on the organised part of my trip was Rifugio Cinque Torri, at the foot of one of five limestone towers that rise majestically from a plateau in the mountains about half an hour by bus from Cortina.

Guide Marcello, Michelle – an Australian, and the only other person on the tour – and I had completed our first climb of nearby Monte Averau then descended to Rifugio Cinque Torre for a late lunch.

Thunder cracked and fat drops of rain began to fall, so it was a relief to be inside the safety of a hut where owners Uberto and Ines Alberti were visiting tables and chatting with guests.



Each chef was tasked with preparing a menu using at least one ingredient from the South Tyrol region. Photo / Supplied

Before World War I the Dolomites were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and for two years during the conflict Austrian and Italian troops waged fierce battles in these mountains. One legacy of that fighting was a network of via ferrata or "iron way" climbing routes with fixed cables, ladders and the occasional bridge. Today, they're a major tourist draw in the summer months, which is also when most rifugi are open.

Rifugio Cinque Torre began in 1904 and has been run by the same family since 1936. From outside, the two-storey stucco building with shutters looks like a farm house. Inside, wood covers the ceiling, the floor and the bottom two-thirds of each wall, an enormous green-tiled, wood-burning stove dominates the centre of the room and there's cold beer on tap.

Marcello explained that the half-moon shaped stuffed pasta we were enjoying were casunziei, a typical dish of the Dolomites. It gave us our first tastes of a region that delectably marries Austrian cuisine with Italian.

On our second day we were ready for a more ambitious climb. Col dei Bos fit the bill: a 500m rock face followed by a long hike uphill past purple-flowering saxifrage, iron-red soil and barbed wire left over from the war.

Last year nine areas in the Dolomites were named on the World Heritage List, partly for their outstanding beauty. Rifugio Lagazuoi, our destination for the night, was perched on the very edge of Mt Lagazuoi, 2752m above sea level, with spectacular views of jagged peaks in every direction.

Outside, there's a big wooden deck and picnic tables. Inside, our three-course dinner began with more casunziei but these were a shocking shade of reddish-purple.

Casunziei rossi are stuffed with pureed beets and potatoes, spiced with cinnamon and served with brown butter and grated parmesan cheese. Deliciously sweet, I could have happily eaten this dish for dessert.

The main course featured tender veal cutlet – I couldn't decide if this was more Austrian (as in Viennese schnitzel) or Italian (veal cutlet Milanese). No matter; it was tasty and filling. Dessert – the real dessert – was a light cake with ricotta cheese.

A couple of days later I decided it was time to try canederli, the local dumplings. We had reached Rifugio Cavazza after three hours climbing a very steep and exposed via ferrata on the beautiful Sella Massif.

However, I was more thirsty than hungry, which may explain why I couldn't finish the two big balls of spinach and bread served in a bowl of melted butter. Or perhaps it simply wasn't a good representation of a local favourite.

Mountain huts in Italy can be privately owned – like Rifugio Cinque Torri and Rifugio Lagazuoi – or owned by the Italian Alpine Club, like Rifugio Cavazza, and operated on contract.

Agustina Lagos Marmol, the owner of Dolomite Mountains says both food and service are usually superior in privately owned huts. "They can charge what they want and they can offer more variety," she explained when she joined us for dinner one evening at Rifugio Franz Kostner, a rustic two-storey stone hut built by the Alpine Club high above the town of Corvara.

But this hut was an exception, Marmol added. It's been managed by the same family for 20 years and is one of her favourites. When we arrived, famished and with blisters on our feet after hiking non-stop for seven hours, almost anything would have been welcome.

The individual wooden trays of cold meats, cheese, and pickles, garnished with edible wild flowers and served

with a basket of bread, was the most beautifully presented and one of the tastiest meals I ate during the week.

On my last two days I ate at a couple more rifugi including the privately owned Utia 1 Tabla, where I sat on the outdoor terrace for my much anticipated knuckle of pork. I crunched into the glazed exterior to meat so tender it practically fell off the bone. The polenta, flecked with fresh thyme, nicely soaked up the basting juices.

Leaving the table to begin my afternoon hike, I was reminded of Peter Mayle's book *A Year in Provence* when he describes walking home with his wife after a particularly large and fine meal as, "pushing our stomachs before us".

I hiked for the rest of the afternoon feeling a bit the same way, thankful to be carrying only my camera and a bottle of water. In the Dolomites, the next rifugio is never far away.

CHECKLIST

Getting there: Fly to Venice from where it's three hours by train and bus to Cortina d'Ampezzo.

Getting around: A three-day mountain pass providing unlimited use of public buses and chairlifts costs €39. See altabadia.org.

Off-mountain accommodation: [Posta Zirm Hotel](#), Corvara: Originally built in 1808 and owned by the same family since 1908. Its exquisite modern spa includes a Finnish sauna, a caldarium and a steam room. Traditional treatments include a hay bath.

[Royal Hotel](#), Cortina d'Ampezzo: No longer regal, but comfortable and clean with a substantial breakfast buffet including delicious Italian brioche.

Rifugi: There are hundreds of mountain huts in the Dolomites, including 761 owned by the Italian Alpine Club and many more that are privately owned. Most provide accommodation as well as meals. Some rifugi have websites in English but many do not.

Eating: Alta Badia Tourism will offer Peaks of Gastronomy again next northern summer and in the coming northern winter A Taste for Skiing will also see Michelin-star chefs designing menus for rifugi.

Guided hiking: Dolomite Mountains customises hiking, climbing and biking tours based on individual interests and fitness levels. It also has some pre-arranged tours. Owner Agustina Lagos Marmol speaks good English. See dolomitemountains.com for more information.

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