

Nomad Editions Real Eats

AUGUST 19, 2011

SIDE DISH

The Rice Man Cometh

ON A CHANCE ENCOUNTER IN ITALY, THE AUTHOR MEETS A TRUE RISOTTO MASTER AND LEARNS THE MEANING OF MASTERING HERSELF

By Laura Fraser

Every once in awhile, a guru crosses your path, one who can reveal meaning and mystery. We have to be ready for these moments of grace that can stir the soul—or in my case, the risotto.


Gurus don't usually announce themselves. You wouldn't expect, for example, that the driver who picked you up at your hotel on the way to visit a winery in Piedmont, Italy, would be a guru. But life is short, and you never know just who is driving your car, so you might as well ask a few questions.

Angelo Fornara, a friendly and outgoing man, was surprised I speak Italian, and for the first moments of our 45-minute drive, we exchanged pleasantries. Then I asked him where he is from.

"Vercelli."

Vercelli may mean nothing to you, but for me, it's a quest, the most you may know of about 45,000 people in Italy who is searching to understand more. It means carnaroli, in short, risotto. The best risotto is from Vercelli. People there have been making it since when the Arabs brought rice north and some Christian missionaries flooded the Po River Valley.

Vercelli may mean nothing to you, but for me, it's a quest, the most you may know of about 45,000 people in Italy who is searching to understand more. It means, in short, risotto. People there have been making it since medieval times, when the Arabs brought rice north and some Christian missionaries flooded the Po River Valley and planted a few hectares.



"Angelo appeared with a beautiful ceramic platter filled with golden risotto. This risotto was his nod to spaghetti carbonara—a risotto carbonara, with egg yolks, parmesan, pancetta and pepper. The risotto was perfectly creamy and al dente at the same time, with both crunchy and soft pieces of pancetta. It was amazing paired with a **Batasiolo Sovrana Barbera d'Alba 2007.**"

SEARCH FOR PERFECTION

For over 10 years, I have been trying to make the perfect risotto. It sounds easy, and a lot of Italians make it look easy: You sauté some onions in a little butter or olive oil, toss in some rice, glaze it, add a splash of wine, then broth, one ladle at a time, stirring all the while, until the rice absorbs or your arm gives out. When it's almost ready, you throw in a few condiments (mushrooms, shrimp, asparagus, fresh peas, pancetta, whatever), and grate a little cheese on top at the end. Voilà. Risotto.

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But risotto can go terribly wrong. You could use brown rice, for instance, and end up with a dish that not even the hippies in your college communal house would eat when they were stoned. You could use bouillon cubes instead of real stock and produce gruel that tastes thin and metallic. You could cook it too long and make glop. You could forget to stir, wander off to check your e-mail, and ruin your pot along with