

Bite-Sized Brilliance

By Peter Boyd

PHOTO CREDIT: Erin Riley

The spider bridge in the distance vaulting tiny trucks and cars over the Welland Canal shimmers uncertainly in the torrid mug of yet another Ontario heatwave. The flattened landscape of box stores, warehouses and auto body shops beneath it might remind you of somewhere else as it pulses dully in the heat, but the rolling hills of Piemonte would not be anywhere near the top of your list. Yet the proud man in the chef's whites is finding it difficult to talk about anything else and, despite the distance and the somewhat improbable circumstances, the cuisine of Piemonte may not have a better ambassador than Oscar Turchi.

He smiles easily, hands quietly helping him frame his words. "The Piemontese, we were always very big in hors d'oeuvres and starters. If you go into any small, traditional *trattoria*, there is never a menu. You sit down and they bring out about twenty different kinds of appetizers, before you even start the meat course!" Since leaving the Toronto restaurant scene for St. Catharines, his company, Savoia Hors d'Oeuvres, has grown in three years from a \$50,000 business to a half a million dollar enterprise with nine employees and a truck almost constantly on the road. "I always wanted to have something on my own," he says.

The Toronto restaurant scene, however, has not forgotten about Oscar. After well-received stints at Borgo Antico and Oro, in 2001 Turchi was headhunted by the Toulà chain of restaurants who installed him as chef in their brand-new Toronto location atop the south tower of the Westin Harbour Castle hotel on the waterfront. The local press gobbled up his food to great acclaim. "There is a Toulà in Cortina d'Ampezzo, the town

I apprenticed in, so I was very proud when they contacted me to be their chef here."

The bearded chef's eyes shine as he reminisces about his early years. "When I started to work, I was 14—very early—washing dishes and floors at a hotel in Rimini. Later, my mentor was Serafino Balzano, chef at the four-star Hotel de la Poste in Cortina d'Ampezzo. I spent three years with him, from *commis* to *chef de partie*. To me, he's still the best. He formed me.

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On September 1 at the Olympic Spirit Toronto complex, Oscar demonstrated his passion for his native cuisine by cooking at a special Italian Chamber of Commerce of Toronto dinner in celebration of the 2006 Winter Olympics in Piemonte. "Piemonte cuisine is a very rich but balanced cuisine. We have a lot of influence from French cooking. That's why we use more cream than southern Italy.

And, it's the fall, now. Just before the winter is *our* time. Truffles, mushrooms, game, risottos—that's our strength. In the summer here, you don't see too many Piemontese dishes. You see them more in the winter because of the richness."

Turchi has worked hard on the menu, hoping to show off some of his favourite dishes, some of which he feels have been unjustly overlooked,

like *zucchine ripiene*, pan-fried zucchini stuffed with meat, cooked vegetables and crushed amaretto cookies. "There are other regional dishes that deserve more attention," he says animatedly. "*Panna cotta* is an excellent dessert that has been overlooked and *bonet* is a local chocolate pudding also made with crumbled amaretto cookies.

The Olympics are going to be great for Piemonte and Torino because people still don't know about Torino and the importance it had in the past. It was the first capital of Italy in 1861, and home to the Fiat Salone dell'Automobile—and Jesus' shroud—which has been in Turin... forever. Also, chocolate. Torino is the capital for chocolate in Italy."

In 1559, for his bravery in defeating the French and Spanish at the battle of San Quintino, Duke Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy was given an exotic gift of chocolate from Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. Once home, this mysterious and barely understood new commodity became the foundation for Italy's most important chocolate industry, thanks to the creativity of Piemontese chefs. "Everything to do with chocolate started in Torino," states Turchi proudly.

He is just as proud of the region's future and its involvement with Slow Food, an association that promotes food and wine culture and defends agricultural biodiversity. "Slow Food has a big meeting in Torino every two years, and every other year, they hold the *Salone del Gusto* there, a big food expo of very niche-specific, top-quality food items for the

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international market." This same Slow Food appreciation for quality, taste and tradition is virtually standard practice throughout Piemonte. "There are no two or three seatings in a Piemontese restaurant! Not like here. You go to restaurant in Piemonte—you sit down at 7pm, you get up at 11pm. That table is reserved for you—and nobody else!"

Oscar Turchi muses for a moment, a hand on his close-cropped, red-flecked beard. "Eating is so nice, you know? It's part of our life. No one should take that away from us. Remember, everything has always been decided around the dinner table. War, peace, weddings... all decided at that table—with food."



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