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# Delicious Traditions of Asolo

Located in the northern Italian province of Treviso, this idyllic little town holds big culinary treasures.

BY SUSAN VAN ALLEN



**I** left Venice, took a train north to Montebelluna, and then hopped into a taxi to my destination: the village of Asolo (pronounced AHH-zow-low). The driver smiled as I gasped over our approach—a curvy road through a lush forest—right out of a fairytale.

He dropped me off in the idyllic tiny historic center. Happy locals sat on the terrace of the elegant Caffè Centrale, facing a quiet piazza: fountain, bell tower, two story stone buildings bedecked with

colorful flower boxes, a medieval castle perched in the near distance. I wandered away and understood Asolo's nickname: "City of One Hundred Horizons." The village is perfectly set over a stunning panorama of vineyards, olive groves, and farmlands, bordered by snow-capped mountains.

In contrast to the crowds of Venice and the labyrinth of its canals, in Asolo I could stroll leisurely without getting lost. There are the remains of the walls and castle of Queen Catherine Cornaro, who reigned here in the Renaissance, transforming

Asolo into an artistic center where top painters and poets of the day gathered. The artsy vibe Cornaro began has remained. Over the centuries Asolo has attracted such stars as the poet Robert Browning, Ernest Hemingway, travel writer Freya Stark, and, most notably, the actress Eleonora Duse, whose beautiful image pops up in Asolo's restaurants, shops, and the lovely Hotel Duse, named in her honor. An easy walk away from the center leads to a pretty cemetery, where Duse's grave is a main attraction—a humble white stone, facing the majestic Monte Grappa.



Along with all the beauty and rich history, this is a delicious place. Asolo is in the province of Treviso, where some of Italy's finest food and wine originated. Most were once simple peasant foods that grew to be elegantly refined and beloved worldwide. For example, there's grappa, a digestivo made of grape seeds and stems. Until the 1960s, it was mainly a drink for farmers to warm themselves up during the winter. Then Signora Giannola Nonino, of a famous Bassano del Grappa distillery, decided to begin making grappa from a single grape. She was an excellent PR person, offering her drink free to journalists and restaurateurs, so slowly it gained an international following.

Treviso is also home to a particular type of radicchio, a vegetable in the chicory family that's been cultivated here since the fifteenth century. Treviso radicchio is shaped like Belgian endive, but with maroon-purple leaves and white ribs. It has a bittersweet taste and is so revered, it's often served on its own as a second course, simply grilled and topped with melted cheese.

And there's polenta, as the flat land is perfect for growing corn. Roman soldiers traditionally sustained themselves on a porridge they called Pulemntum (where polenta got its name) that was made from wheat or buckwheat, spelt or barley. Then corn was introduced to Italy through Venetian trade routes in the 16th century, and soon Treviso landowners realized they could grow vast fields of it, so the peasant porridge in these parts began to be made from cornmeal.

In Asolo, cornmeal is also used to make pinza—a winter cake flavored with nuts and fruit. Since it was autumn and getting cooler, Francesco at the Gelateria Browning was offering pinza (made from his mamma's recipe), along with mulled wine—a fabulous fortifying combination.

I slipped into a folksy place for lunch, Corte del Re, and sat with friendly locals at a long wooden table, treating myself to a combo plate of Asolo specialties: grilled polenta topped with radicchio, and a local cheese—Morlacco di Grappa—soft and subtly flavored with herbs. Dinner was at Osteria al Bacaro, an institution that's been a thriving social center since

the 19th century, where a boisterous card game was going on in the corner. The plate of homemade bigoli, thick spaghetti with radicchio that was set before me, was the perfect autumn meal—a hearty dish that blended with the warm osteria atmosphere. To finish, the waitress offered me a traditional ending: a tiny tumbler of throat tingling fine grappa to join with the locals in toasting the traditional Asolo way.

For more info: [www.visittreviso.it](http://www.visittreviso.it)

*Susan Van Allen is the author of 100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go and the Golden Days in Italy blog. She travels frequently to Italy, the native land of her grandparents, and lives in Los Angeles. [susanvanallen.com](http://susanvanallen.com)*

## The Recipes



### Braised Radicchio and Bigoli

- 1 pound Bigoli (thick whole wheat spaghetti) or regular whole wheat spaghetti
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 garlic clove, peeled and smashed
- 2 ounces thinly sliced prosciutto, diced
- 2 large heads radicchio
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- Parmesan cheese, if desired

In a large pot, boil water to cook the pasta.

In a large pan, add the oil and sauté the garlic in the olive oil until it is golden. Discard the garlic and then add the sliced prosciutto, cooking 2 to 3 minutes until lightly browned. Add the radicchio, and

sauté until wilted. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Cook the pasta in salted boiling water as directed on the package, until al dente. Reserve one cup of the cooking water just before you drain the pasta. Mix the drained pasta in the pan with the cooked radicchio, gradually adding the pasta water under low heat, until absorbed. Serve immediately, topped with Parmesan cheese, if desired.

Makes 4 servings.

### Grilled Treviso Radicchio with Asiago Cheese

- 4 heads radicchio
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 4 ounces Asiago cheese, grated

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Trim the core end of each radicchio and remove outer leaves. Quarter each head, cutting lengthwise. Season with salt and pepper, and brush each head with olive oil.

Place the radicchio in a seasoned, ridged grill pan, over moderate heat, covered, and turn every ten minutes until browned and tender. Or, you can grill the radicchio over hot coals, turning until browned and tender, about a half an hour.

Transfer cooked radicchio to a baking sheet and sprinkle cheese over it. Bake in oven until cheese melts, just a few minutes. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

### Polenta Fruit Cake

- ½ cup grappa
- ½ cup currants
- 4 cups water
- 1½ cups polenta
- 1 cup all purpose flour, plus additional for the baking dish
- 1 cup butter, plus additional for the baking dish
- ½ cup dried figs, diced
- ½ cup fennel seeds
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon rind

Preheat oven to 350°F. Butter and flour a baking pan, 9 x 11 inches. Pour the grappa in a small bowl and add the currants, to soak them. Bring the water to a boil and add the polenta, stirring so no lumps form, and cook for about 30 to 40 minutes. Transfer to a mixing bowl to cool. Drain the currants (you won't be needing the grappa, but may want to reserve it to drink or use in another recipe). When polenta has cooled, mix in the flour, butter, currants, figs, fennel seeds, sugar, and lemon rind.

Transfer the mixture to a baking pan and bake for about an hour. Prick the cake with a toothpick and if it comes out clean, the cake is ready. Serve at room temperature or chilled.

Makes 16 servings.