

Valle D'Aosta



An Alpine treasure to seduce the epicurean heart

BY JENNIFER CHASE ESPOSITO

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Valle d'Aosta, the smallest of Italy's 20 regions, needs no second chance to make a good first impression. Nestled in Italy's northwestern corner, Aosta is a combination of Italy and the area's immediate neighbors — Switzerland and France — perfectly gift-wrapped into one package for savvy travelers. Diners can eat Italian food in a chalet while the radio plays songs in Patois, the regional French-lilting Italian dialect heard only in this tiny corner of the world. Snow-capped Monté Bianco (Mont Blanc) sets the backdrop for hills filled with the soft-eyed cows whose milk produces the region's finest export: Fontina Valle d'Aosta.

In a country known for its beautiful cuisine and even more beautiful

women, these parts are more Heidi than Sophia: Gingerbread-adorned homes with hanging red geraniums dot winding roads. It's not Austria, but these hills are more *Sound of Music* than *Roman Holiday*. Mountain bases are marked by the hooves of 1000-pound milk cows that won't walk on an asphalt road that would make it much easier to get to their high-pasture dining rooms.

Even with its pristine allure, few Americans drawn to Venice's romance, Sicily's coastline and Rome's eternal beauty consider Valle d'Aosta worth more than a quick stop before leaving Italy. But two things bring travelers in the know to Aosta: its landscape — and Fontina Valle d'Aosta.

Valdostans produce their cheese

with a balance of old-world customs and state-of-the-art technology. Cheesemakers belonging to the Cooperativa Produttori Latte e Fontina — The Milk and Fontina Cooperative Producers travel through timeless mountain fields with their ever-present cell phones, and electronic tracking systems help them monitor the batches of cheese. Yet they still hand-stir liters of rennet, whey, and milk in copper cauldrons in stalls built near their herds in the mountains. This mixing of technology, history, botany, chemistry, and unfathomably good cooking produces one of Italy's most nuanced cheeses. Fontina Valle d'Aosta is decidedly not the waxy red- or brown-rinded cheese simply labeled Fontina that is often found on the



shelves of U.S. supermarkets.

"Industry doesn't want this to succeed," says Roberto Ronc, council member of the Board of Agriculture and Natural Resources for the Autonomous Region of the Valle d'Aosta. Ronc is responsible for helping to protect and promote Fontina Valle d'Aosta in Europe and serves as guide and spokesperson for visitors to the region. "Here you have poetry, nature, history. Fontina is milk and culture, history and terroir. To understand it — the behavior of it — that is the important factor."

"There is a direct relation between the cows, milk, and cheese production," notes Nancy Radke, United States director of the U.S. Information Offices of Fontina Valle D'Aosta and

Parmigiano Reggiano. "Most people don't know the true origin of Fontina Valle d'Aosta."

But people like Radke and Ronc are working to change that.

claiming the matterhorn

Before 1996, anyone could make a cheese in the Fontina method and call it Fontina. Non-Valle d'Aosta Fontinas were available even in Italy. But since 1996, Fontina produced in Valle d'Aosta has DOP — protected designation of origin — status. Today, the only cheese that can call itself Fontina Valle d'Aosta is made in the Aosta Valley.

For more than 700 years Fontina Valle d'Aosta has been made the same way. Aged no fewer than 60 days, the cheeses are made from single batches

of milk that were drawn from cows just two hours earlier. It takes 9,200 liters of milk to make a batch of Fontina Valle d'Aosta and that strict time limit means trucking to a distant facility is out of the question. Cheese-makers' lives revolve entirely around their herds; they live on site with their staffs, making cheese in stalls built at each of the three pasture levels where their cows graze and are milked throughout the year.

"There are no Saturdays, no Sundays, no days off" from milking, says Ronc. Milking occurs "every day, twice a day, every day of your life."

The proof is in the cheese. You can learn to appreciate its nuances by performing this little ritual: Take a piece and put it in a wine glass; cover it with



your hand for a minute, then move the glass around so the cheese bounces; wait a few seconds, then sniff. That's how experts detect the dried grass or fresh wildflowers like violets and vanilla-scented orchids, minerals, and anything else the cows ate during that day's grazing. Fontina Valle d'Aosta literally tastes of summer or winter depending on when it was made.

"Those industrial cheeses, every day, have the same taste. In the Valle d'Aosta, each wheel of Fontina has a different flavor character, and we're proud of that," says Ronc. Anything not labeled Fontina DOP or bearing the official Consorzio stamp with its depiction of the Matterhorn is considered to be Fontal.

"People just need to get to know

this cheese," claims Radke, who is responsible for fostering U.S. knowledge of true Fontina Valle d'Aosta. She has worked with the Consorzio del Formaggio Parmigiano-Reggiano for 19 years in the same capacity as she does with the Produttori Latte e Fontina. In that time, thanks in part to her effort, Americans now appreciate authentic Parmigiano-Reggiano. It's been a long road from the green can to the slab cut from a giant wheel. More Americans now look for authenticity in the famous pin-dots on Parmigiano Reggiano's rind, and Radke hopes that same cognition will happen with Fontina Valle d'Aosta. "Americans are increasingly becoming aware of and seeking out natural cheeses, full-flavored cheeses and artisan cheeses.

Fontina Valle d'Aosta is a primo example of all that."

attraziones turisticas

A short drive from the shops in downtown Aosta — which, in typical Italian fashion were built within the walls of an old Roman fort — you can find the oldest representation of Fontina. Outside one of the entrances to Issogne Castle — one of many castles in Aosta — is a mural depicting life as in the 14th century. It's a rustic, weathered image of kitchen staff preparing a meal from a table gorgeously strewn with ingredients, one of which is a wheel of Fontina. "That it's depicted among daily life indicates it was something daily, and common, and not only eaten by the rich," explains Elisa-



betta Converso, a guide with Tours and Projects for Tourism in Aosta.

Agricultural tourism is big in the Valle d'Aosta; 10,000 visitors a year trek to learn Fontina's history at the Cooperativa Produttori Latte e Fontina. Established in 1957 to make, age, and market Fontina from the region's 300 producers, the Cooperativa also educates. Visitors can watch a video on how Fontina is made, tour the underground aging facility that was once a copper mine, and learn why the cheese is the region's proudest export.

Under the watchful eye of Ezio Toscoz, the Cooperativa's director, 70 staff are responsible for dry-salting and salt-washing the rounds in the aging facility, rotating the forms, and then testing them after 100 days before

granting them their DOP stamp.

"We collaborate often with the Board of Agriculture and Natural Resources," says Toscoz, a 26-year veteran of the cheese industry. "Since about 2000, the cooperative has had a project called 'Fontina Quality,' which has rewarded the best products. I run quality checks, go out and get cheese forms, cut them, and taste them for problems and [to learn] what makes them good."

Today, 90 percent of the Valle d'Aosta's Fontina is marketed in Italy — 80 percent in northern Italy, eight percent in central, and two percent in the south. The remaining 10 percent is exported to Europe, the United States, Australia, Russia, and Japan. Toscoz's cooperative produces 70 percent of all

of Italy's Fontina.

regional bounty

Aosta is still an agrarian community, and its cuisine reflects bold dishes designed to keep its inhabitants warm in winter and energized during the summer milking months. Although 90 percent of Aosta's milk makes cheese, the region is known for more than just Fontina Valle d'Aosta. According to tour guide Converso, "A typical Valle d'Aosta family should have a garden with potatoes and grapes. You don't ever separate Valdostans [from] their potatoes!"

Visitors should not miss the regional specialties. Seuppa a la Vapel-lenentse is a soup made with layers of Fontina and bread moistened with



broth; polenta with fonduta — a decadent cheese sauce made with Fontina — is part of nearly every meal. In fact, most meals and snacks include Fontina and copa, a harder-than-wood whole-grain wheat bread eaten with cheese or moistened with sips of wine. In some places, copa is still baked in community ovens.

The Aosta Valley is renowned for its potatoes, apples, walnut oil, chestnuts, and charcuterie. Restaurant and home meals alike feature antipasti plates of cured meats such as lardo, pork fat-back seasoned with herbs and spices, then brined in salt; boudin, salami made with potatoes, beets, and lardo; motzetta di cervo, dried, cured venison; motzetta di camoscio, dried, cured chamoix meat — chamoix are

goat-like natives of the region; and motzetta di capra, dried, cured goat meat. The plate often includes a bowl of creamy butter chunks, sweetened pieces of roasted chestnut, and thin slices of lardo that when eaten together create one of the Valle d'Aosta's favorite indulgences.

Too small for the expansive vineyards found elsewhere in Italy, the valley's rocky nooks and crannies favor specific grapes. Its wines are a unique mix of Italian Dolcetto and Nebbiolo, German Muller Thurgau, and French Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes. And then there's the region's grappa: No self-respecting meal ends without it. Distilled from the must of the wine-pressing process, Valdostan grappa is often infused with the same wildflow-

ers the cows graze on.

The world of the food and the people who take such pride in making it is fundamentally cyclical in Aosta: Cows graze flowers; flowers make grappa; grappa warms cheesemakers; cheesemakers keep cows happy; happy cows produce more milk; more milk means more cheese. There is nothing accidental about this natural way of life. "Cows are pastured [and] eat the native flora in the alpeggio," says Radke. "It would be hard for any Valdostan to believe that cows could exist in any other way. From an ecological perspective, this plays into the American ideal of animal wellness and well-being."

And in that explanation, the Valdostan traditions suddenly seem not so far away. **CC**