

ITALIA!

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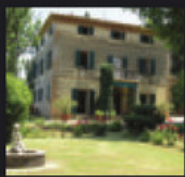
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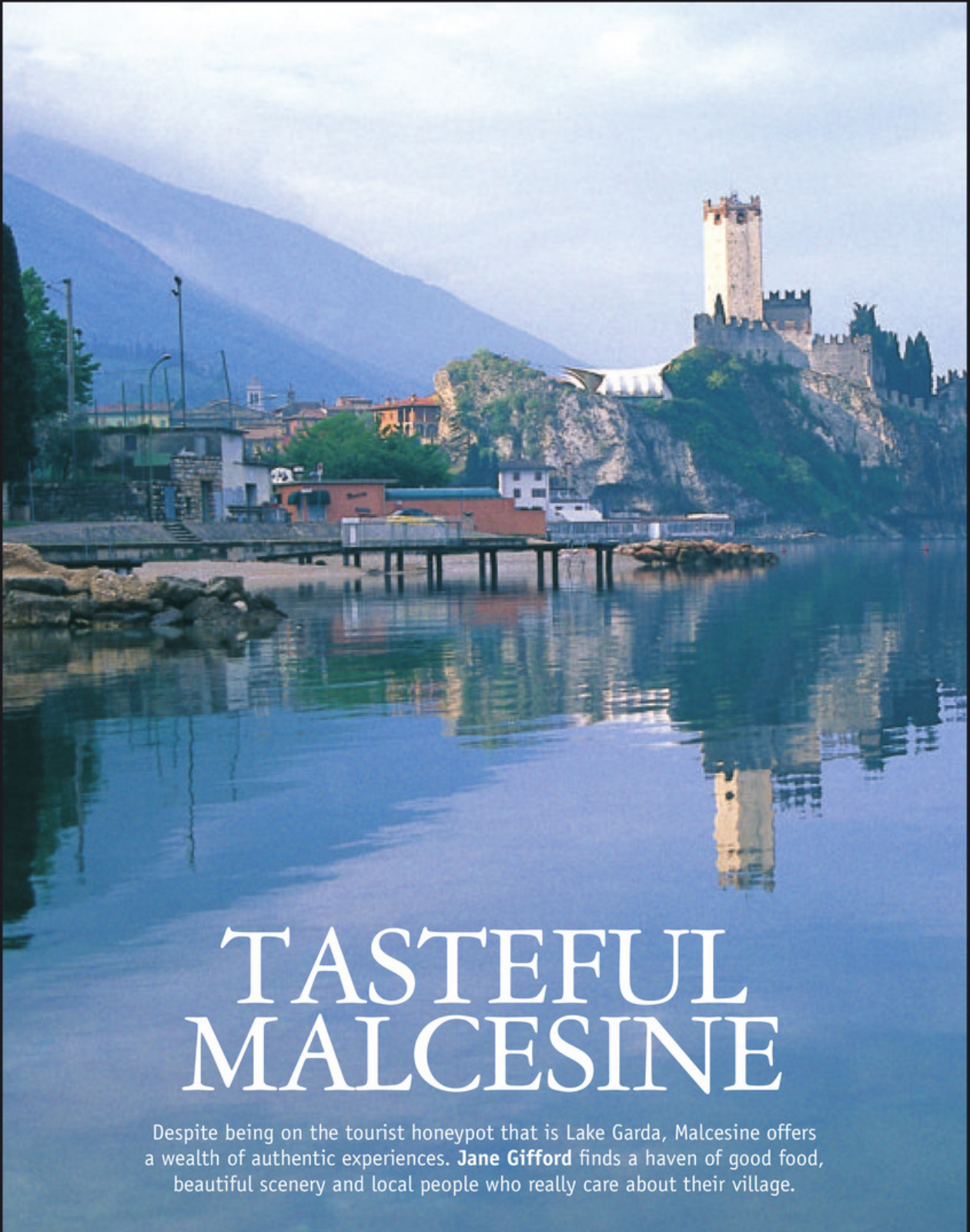
River Cafe recipes

New dishes from Ruth Rogers and Rose Gray

Time out on Lake Garda



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TASTEFUL MALCESINE

Despite being on the tourist honeypot that is Lake Garda, Malcesine offers a wealth of authentic experiences. **Jane Gifford** finds a haven of good food, beautiful scenery and local people who really care about their village.

All photos © Jane Gifford



THEY HAVE AN INTIMATE KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRADITIONS OF THE REGION AND A DEEP RESPECT FOR ALL THE LAKES AND MOUNTAINS HAVE TO OFFER.

The awesome picture-postcard scenery was suddenly transformed. Moments before windsurfers had been riding surging blue waves. Sun-spangled surf crashed against the beach and the opposite shore had seemed close beneath the towering Dolomites. Then, as if by magic, the place was becalmed. Mountains and lakes dissolved in a soft blue mist. Not so good for the usual tourist fare perhaps, but there is a lot more to Malcesine than the obvious charm of its surrounding scenery and local people think it is time to put the place on the map for more than the usual tourist package.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Take the Pallua family for example. They are committed to providing a service to the visitor that enhances the environment and benefits the local community. Signora Pallua comes from neighbouring Torbole, where her father was a priest. They also ran a hotel business. Signor Pallua hails from Cortina in the high Alps. His

family too were in the hotel business and winter sports were his passion. Together they have an intimate knowledge of the traditions of the region and a deep respect for all the lakes and mountains have to offer, along with those elements of Italian life we English so admire – a close-knit family life, style and flare for living, a love of good food and pride in their local culture.

In the 1960s the Palluas bought a hotel on the shores of Lake Garda next to Malcesine and made their mark by completely demolishing it. They replaced it with a building that they designed themselves. Sprawling budget holiday developments with nothing to offer locals were spreading like a rash. Their aim was to provide a lakeside bar, restaurant and high-quality accommodation, without ruining the landscape.

The resulting Hotel Europa is a masterpiece of modern Italian elegance and simplicity. Inside the building is light, airy and open-plan. Floor-to-ceiling windows have views to die for – even from the pool which comes complete with Jacuzzi, wave machine,

Turkish bath and gym. The excellent cuisine in the hotel's Ristorante al Pontile draws on local ingredients, recipes and wines, and the food is beautifully presented.

Everyone admires the place. It is a favourite venue for local wedding parties, business conferences, a special meal out or a lakeside beer and it truly is a family affair. The parents and their children, grandchildren and friends eat alongside the guests, and they are always available for help and advice. Marco, Silvia and Sara have inherited their parents' desire to improve the quality and scope of things on offer to the visitor to Malcesine in a way that benefits the community and enhances the charm of the area.

Silvia is a nature-conservation expert with extensive knowledge of the flora and fauna of Monte Baldo, which rises behind the hotel and can be climbed to a height of 1,760m by cable car. Silvia has taught in

Clockwise from top left: The cable car from Malcesine 1,760m up Monte Baldo; the harbour at Torri del Benaco south of Malcesine; a game of trisac at Speckstube. Below: Christian, Marco and Louisa at Osteria alla Rosa.



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IN THE SUMMER THE MOUNTAIN SLOPES ABOUND WITH RARE ORCHIDS. IN WINTER MASSES OF DELICATE WILD CROCUS SURVIVE THE RAVAGES OF SNOW.

Left to right: Malcesine and castle in picture-perfect mountain scenery; Castello Scaligero. Below: Flavio and young cheeses in the dairy.

► local schools and takes parties of children to explore and appreciate the rich variety of the local wildlife and to learn ways of preserving it. In summer the mountain slopes abound with rare orchids. In winter masses of delicate wild crocus somehow survive the ravages of snow and ice.

Sister Sara is an expert yachtswoman and the person to consult if you are there for the sports. She used to work full-time as a sailing instructor, but the success of the family business means she is now mainly involved in the management of the hotel.

GOOD HOSPITALITY

Brother Marco, his wife Luisa and manager Christian run the Osteria alla Rosa tucked away in quiet backstreets close to the castle, but apart from the usual tourist bustle. Osteria alla Rosa has been at the centre of the local community since 1919 and they have worked hard to

keep this tradition alive. It is open from 8.30am right through until 2am. It is a lively place and a popular haunt for local old boys discussing the best fishing, their conversation fuelled by red wine and cigarettes. Local housewives exchange recipes and the latest gossip and people are always dropping by with all manner of home-grown goodies.

The house motto in local dialect is 'Quel che ghè fin che ghè mè' ('I can give you that which you give me'). Historically people have always brought their own food and drink here to share and enjoy. The staple was beans and pasta, tripe soup, polenta, rabbit on Sundays and fish in season. Marco and Luisa have greatly extended the menu of course, and the kitchen was fully modernised in 1998 and a licensed bar introduced, but the business still remains very much a community affair, with local small producers providing most of the ingredients and recipes.

A significant advantage to this communal approach is that the Pallua family are the first to receive the best of the new season's local produce, like

delicious white asparagus and fish and cheeses. They also help to promote and organise festivals to celebrate the regional fare. "The law in Italy has to a large extent squeezed out the small producer, but we are aiming to change this and put Garda's food on the tourist map," says Marco.

For example, 500 small local olive growers have recently formed a cooperative and Garda's distinctive oil is now winning major prizes in national competitions. "Several years ago one of our old regulars told us of a long-neglected traditional recipe that combines local olives with grappa. We experimented with the formula serving it here and at the hotel and it proved so popular that for the past two years we have gone in to commercial production."

The result is Olivetto: Grappa alle Olive del Lago di Garda. You can sample it at Osteria alla Rosa as an aperitif served with canapés of local sardines and orange peppers, or as confectionery in sweet white-chocolate truffles rolled in powdered pistachio nuts. The recipe for Olivetto remains a closely guarded secret, ►



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► but the drink itself is fast gaining international renown as tourists take bottles home as a reminder of the unique flavour of the region.

LOCAL PRODUCE

A regular contributor to the cuisine of Osteria alla Rosa is Flavio Chincarini. Flavio and his wife Angela have been farming here together for nearly 30 years producing butter, cheese from goat and cow's milk, as well as salami and olive oil. Seventeen years ago they invested in modern machinery to keep up with EC law, but the general process of farming remains unchanged. In winter they live with their livestock on the lower slopes of the mountains surrounded by their olive groves. The pampered cows are housed in barns, but this is nothing like English battery farming. Flavio's herd is the family's pride and joy and he holds many trophies as proof of the health and quality of his animals.

Visitors to the farm are encouraged. Daughter Erica runs a small shop. You can look around and sample the food, which tastes even better when you have the privilege of seeing where and how it was produced. When the weather improves in spring, the Chincarini



ANOTHER OF FLAVIO'S PASSIONS IS HIS TRACTORS, SO ONCE A YEAR HE ORGANISES A PARADE. THEY ARE CHERISHED LIKE RARE SPORTS CARS.

family transfer their home and livestock to rich pastures on their farm on the high mountain slopes of Monte Baldo, where a diet of Alpine herbs and flowers gives their food a unique and exceptional flavour.

Another of Flavio's passions is his tractors, so once a year he organises a parade where a number of local farmers get together and drive their tractors to Piazza Statuto in the centre of Malcesine to show off their machines. There were 40 tractors in the parade this year, many of them Ferraris – tractors here are cherished like rare sports cars. After a morning's bonding and banter, the farmers drive off in a tractor parade to feast and celebrate the rest of the day together. Piazza Statuto is also home to a regular lively market on Saturdays, where you can buy local arts and crafts, food, leather, clothes and masses more at extremely reasonable prices.

Not far from Flavio's winter farm is the Speckstube di Mario ed Enza. Mario is an old friend and skiing buddy of Signor Pallua from his home town of Cortina who, with his wife Enza, has brought a taste of traditional Dolomite cuisine to Malcesine. A huge wood fire is kept burning at the Speckstube over which whole pigs and chickens are roasted. You help yourself to huge slabs of meat and spare ribs and wash it down with local Forst beer. Like the Osteria alla Rosa, the Speckstube is a favourite haunt for locals, as well as tourists, hosting regular games of *triscac*, a Malcesine card game much like poker. When the weather is fine everybody sits outside.

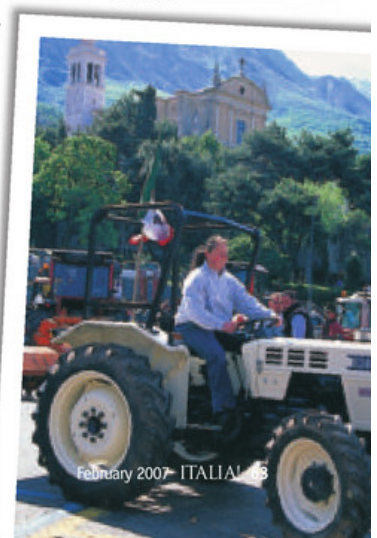
SIGHTS TO SEE

No visit to Malcesine is, of course, complete without using the waterbus to cruise the lake or walking along the shore. If you're the sporty type,

then there is everything on offer from windsurfing and sailing, to mountain-biking and winter skiing. You can get a one-way ticket on the cable car to the top of Monte Baldo and walk or bike down.

If you go, you must take in the Scaligeri castle. The views over the battlements are stunning, especially looking down over the jumble of terra-cotta-tiled roofs of the old town. Also be sure to explore the narrow cobble streets away from the centre beneath overhanging gables. The whole town itself is used as an art gallery, featuring the people of the place. Old black and white photographs are hung as banners from the buildings, showing life and characters from times ►

Clockwise from top: Windsurfers on an early morning ride; Hotel Europa right on the beach; cobble Malcesine backstreet. **Below:** Tractor parade in Piazza Statuto.



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THE WHOLE TOWN IS USED AS AN ART GALLERY. BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS ADORN THE BUILDINGS.

Clockwise from top: Lakeside dog walkers; photos of old timers on the streets; wild figs and misty Garda. Below: Goats at Flavio and Angela Chincarini's farm.

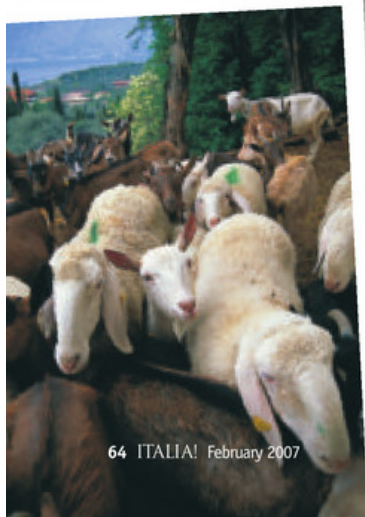
gone by, each photo placed where it was taken. In streets around the castle the photos by local artists are of the present younger generation. There are wonderful bronzes dotted about the place, and hung from the trees in the pleasant shady park just off

Piazza Statuto I found an exhibition of photographs of all the wild orchids of the region.

My advice to any visitor to Malcesine would be to seek out food and entertainment away from the teeming waterfront bars. You don't have to walk far to get a true taste of the place and you will be doing your bit to bolster the real life, traditions and produce

of the locals. It is barely a five-minute walk from the waterbus stop to Porto Vecchio. A huge photograph hangs on the waterfront of women doing their washing as they once used to here on the lakeside steps. Ristorante Porto Vecchio is full of art books for you to peruse and here conversation seems as important as the proceeds of the bar.

It is much easier to get to Malcesine today without having to be part of a package holiday. You can get a free transfer bus from Verona and Brescia airports, which will take you to all destinations on the eastern shore of Garda. There is a small charge for the service from Milan. So why not plan your trip yourself and book your holiday directly? You will get so much more from the experience, while leaving yourself with plenty of time to get to know the locals and check out their food and festivals. ■



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USEFUL CONTACTS

➤ **HOTEL EUROPA**
Ristorante al Pontile (Four Star)
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VR Lago di Garda
Italia
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Fax +39 045 657 0245
www.europa-hotel.net
Email: info@europa-hotel.net

➤ **OSTERIA ALLA ROSA**
Marco and Luisa Pallua
Piazza Baccara, 5
Malcesine
VR Lago di Garda
Italia
☎ +39 045 657 0783
www.osteriaallarosa.it

➤ **OLIVETTO**
Grappa alle Olive
Produzione Marco Pallua
www.olivetto.it

➤ **AZIENDA AGRICOLA**
Famiglia Chincarini
Via Bassinel, 10A
Malcesine
Lago di Garda
Malcesine
VR Italia
☎ +39 045 740 0889/045 657 0269

➤ **SPECKSTUBE**
www.speckstube.com
Email: info@speckstube.com

GETTING THERE

➤ **BY AIR**
Thomsonfly (www.thomsonfly.com) has routes to Verona from Birmingham, Glasgow, Gatwick and Manchester. BA (www.ba.com) also fly to Verona from Gatwick. Astraus (www.flyastraus.com) fly from Gatwick to Brescia and Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) from Stansted. A free transfer bus is available from Verona and Brescia (bookings ☎ +39 045 620 9428).

➤ **BY CAR**
From the north: Exit the A22 at Rovereto Sud and take the SS249 in the direction of Mori, Torbole and Malcesine.
From the south: Exit the A22 at Affi and head in the direction of Bardolino, Garda and Malcesine.
From the east/west: Exit the A4 at Peschiera and take the SS249 to Peschiera, Garda and Malcesine.

➤ **BY TRAIN**
Some trains on the Milan-Venice line from Stazione Centrale stop at Peschiera. An APT bus service (☎ +33 045 805 7911, www.apt.vr.it) runs from Peschiera to Riva del Garda via Malcesine.