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travel

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Grand entree

A food beginner's
tour of Europe

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SOUTH AMERICA

GOING BUSH IN
HONG KONG

A far cry from home

Food philistine **Gregor Stronach** has an epicurean epiphany during a honeymoon tour of Europe.

have eaten myriad odd, amusing and downright dangerous things in my travels: ostrich-meat omelettes for breakfast in South Africa; hand-rolled pigskin spring rolls from a street vendor in Hanoi; crocodile steaks in the Northern Territory. The list goes on.

But my palate is woefully lacking when it comes to fine food. Never in my life would I have entertained the idea of flying to the other side of the world with the express intention of sampling the culinary efforts of top local chefs.

Let me state for the record that I am not a foodie. It took a concerted effort by my wife to get me to even acknowledge that food could be something more than a thrice-daily refuelling. Her gentle coaching led to an increased interest in all things kitchen-related, so I could at least handle the pans if I needed to.

As my interest piqued, I began to read more and it was after chewing my way through John Dickie's epic *Delizia!*—a deconstruction and retelling of the history of Italian food—that my wife and I decided that Italy was the place for a food and wine honeymoon.

Instantly excited by the prospect, my wife began researching places to eat. When she happened upon a mention of Osteria Francescana in Modena (a city I thought only existed as somewhere to manufacture Ferrari cars), we booked a table for two and set about planning the rest of our trip around that evening. My wife was extremely enthusiastic; me, not so much. Osteria Francescana holds the No. 13 spot on S. Pellegrino's rankings of the best restaurants in the world—a list dominated by the likes of elBulli and The Fat Duck.

I can understand when the likes of celebrity foodie Matt Preston wax lyrical about the finest restaurants in the world. But what prospect does an evening's dining at an establishment such as Osteria Francescana hold for someone with a

ham-and-pineapple-pizza palate? The answer developed slowly over the course of a six-week journey across Europe in which we ate and drank our way from Poland to Belgium, through France and to Italy.

Beginning in Poland, I was introduced to smalec—a bowl of solidified pig lard spiked with chunks of crackling and served with pickles and thick slabs of crusty white bread. It requires industrial quantities of vodka to be even remotely appealing—vodka that is readily forthcoming in the restaurants and bars around the Old Town square in Krakow.

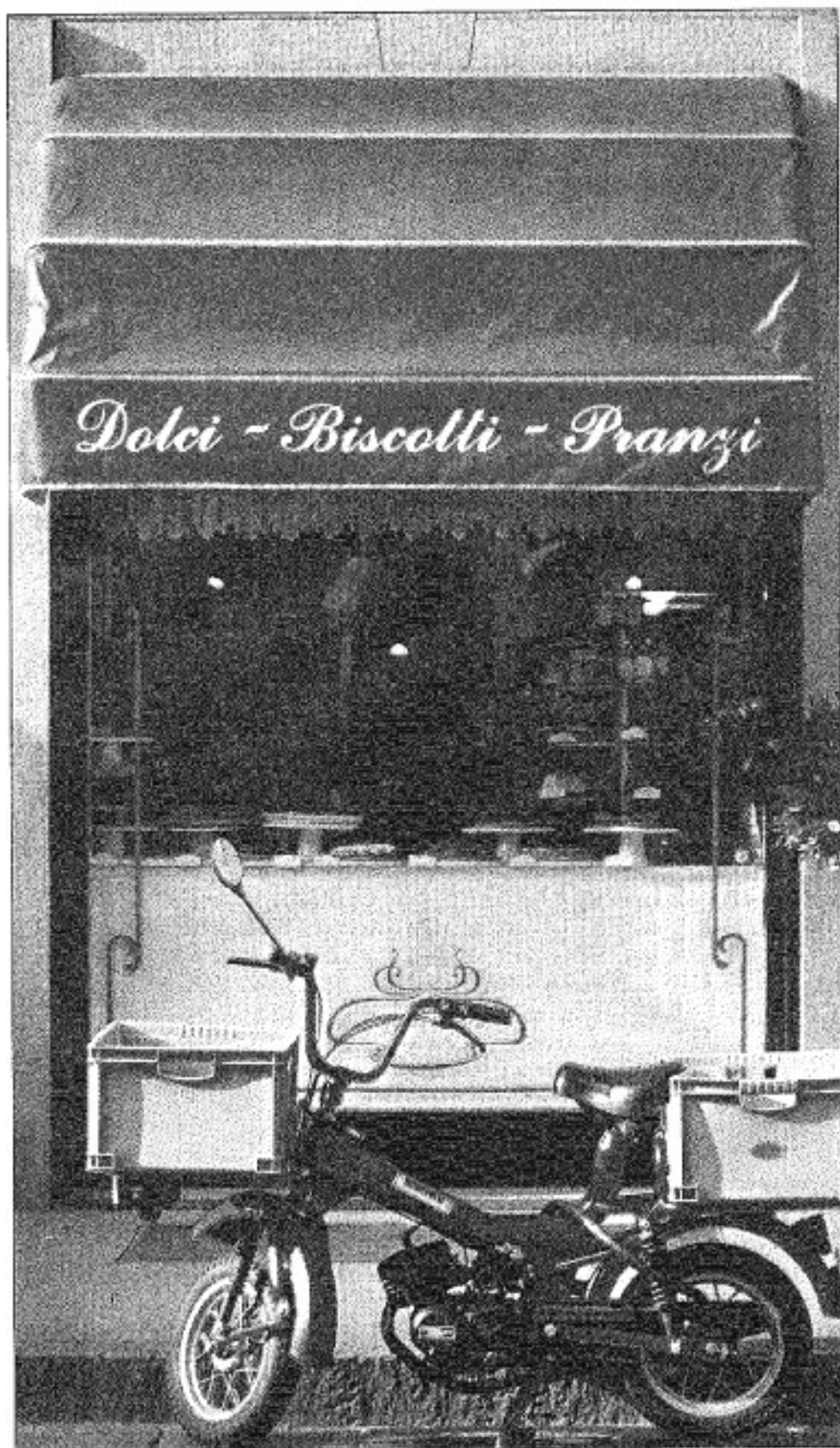
In Antwerp, I discovered a North Sea shrimp

Right there at the table, in front of everyone, I blubbed like a little kid as my mind did cartwheels.

bisque so good, I ate it for lunch on six consecutive days at the Terrace Cafe in the Antwerp Hilton. The cafe is nestled on the edge of the Groenplaats, the focal point of Antwerp's historical old quarter, and offers views of Our Lady's Cathedral that match the food in quality. In the evenings, we dined on the city's famous mussels and chips, washed down with an assortment of Belgium's panoply of beers.

In France, we stayed at the Trianon Palace hotel in Versailles, a short hop by train from the centre of Paris. Versailles is often overlooked as a destination, as visitors pop in, cruise through the palace gardens then disappear at the end of the day in a flotilla of tour buses.

The Trianon Palace hotel is home to foul-mouthed celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay's eponymous establishment, which has two



Michelin stars. The food was good—really good—prompting Ramsay-esque four-lettered grunts of appreciation from me and a knowing smile from my wife. The food was immaculately presented and delivered with a level of service not seen since the abolition of slavery. There were more staff than diners—and every single staff member was busy in a whisper-quiet way that oozed class.

Only two things lowered the tone of the evening. The first was a squeaky kitchen door that sounded like someone trying to fart discreetly but failing miserably. The second was allowing my palate to prejudice my choice of meal. I ordered lamb cooked in a fashion that I could find on any given day in just about any restaurant in Sydney. I left the restaurant feeling great, if not mildly

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- Tour by boat the Mekong Delta, the "bread basket" of Vietnam.
- Cool your heels amongst the lakes, waterfalls and forests of Dalat in the Central Highlands.
- Feast your eyes on more than 3000 islands scattered like jewels in the emerald waters of Halong Bay.
- Stroll amongst the lakes and green open spaces of Hanoi, "Paris of the Orient".

CHINA

24 Days, Fully Inclusive
From: \$5,180pp twin share

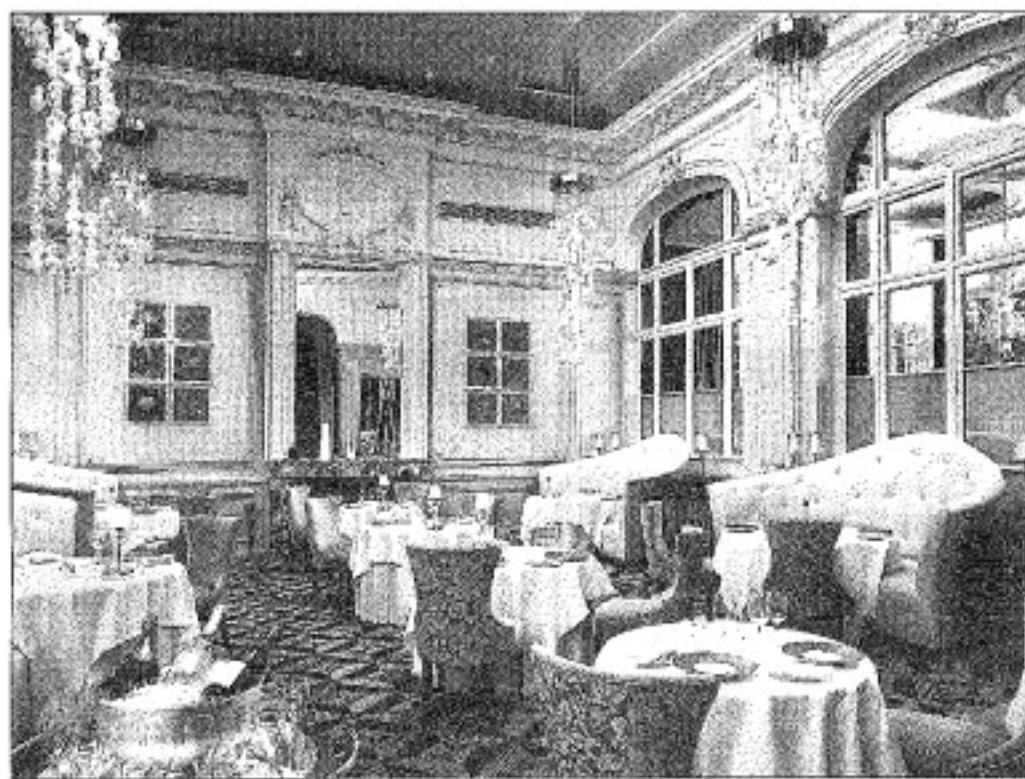
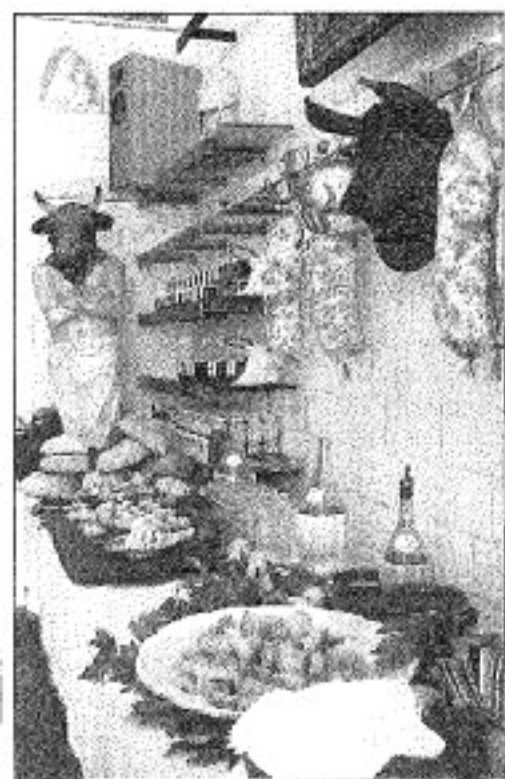
- Explore the south-eastern part of China from Hong Kong to Beijing.
- Ease into Chinese culture starting your trip in the former British colony of Hong Kong.
- Relax at Guilin on the banks of the Li River, surrounded by limestone peaks.
- Wander in the forest of stone pillars shaped by the wind and rain at Shilin.
- Imagine the presence of a million people marching at Tiananmen Square in the very heart of Beijing.
- Visit the centre dedicated to breeding the world's favourite "teddy bear", the endangered Giant Panda.

SOUTH AMERICA

28 Days, Fully Inclusive
From: \$11,880pp twin share

- Take time to experience a grand circle tour of South America, starting in Chile and continuing on to Argentina, Brazil, Peru & Bolivia.
- Savour the natural beauty of the chalet town of Bariloche, set amidst lakes and Andean peaks.
- Bite into the best steaks in the world in Buenos Aires.
- Meander amongst the floating reed islands on Lake Titicaca, the sacred lake of the Incas.

LAN



Eat well... (clockwise from left) a cafe in Milan; Dario Cecchini's restaurant in Chianti; Gordon Ramsay's restaurant at Versailles; wine tasting in Paris; a dish at Osteria Francescana. Photos: Lonely Planet Images; photolibary.com

disappointed, that I had been given an opportunity to stretch my gastronomic legs but squandered it by refusing to budge from my comfort zone.

Onward to Italy and a date with culinary destiny. Osteria Francescana is a tiny six-table establishment at Via Stella 22, Modena. It is regarded by those in the know as a home of some of the most cutting-edge Italian cuisine in the world.

Chef Massimo Bottura works with texture, flavour and presentation – and from the hand-painted watercolours by Giuliano Della Casa on the menus to the immaculately sculpted food on every plate, everything is done with an understated elegance. The wine list is particularly impressive, looking more like a leather-bound phone book and featuring hundreds of wines.

Unlike Ramsay's effort in Versailles, where he had designed the menu, chosen the decor, hung his name over the door and then left someone else in charge of day-to-day operations, Bottura can be found in the kitchen, working slavishly to create meals for his patrons.

The night we were there, he walked the floor of his restaurant like a congenial and ever-so-slightly anxious host, talking briefly with everyone.

When he discovered that we were on our honeymoon and had travelled to Modena specifically to eat at his restaurant, he beamed.

"I will create something for you tonight, very special," he said, his eyes sparkling at the idea. "A celebration of vegetables of different texture and temperature. And then, if you will allow, I shall choose your desserts. It would be my pleasure."

And he was gone, back to the kitchen, moments

TRIP NOTES

- ▷ Gordon Ramsay au Trianon, 1 Boulevard de la Reine, Versailles, France. Entrees from €42-€55 (\$64-\$83), mains €55-€70, desserts €22-€44. Tasting menu, €160 a person, plus €90 for matching wines. Phone + 33 1 30 84 5555, see gordonramsay.com/gtrautrianon/.
- ▷ Osteria Francescana, Via Stella 22, Modena, Italy. Meals from €100-€160. Tasting menu €90/€115. Phone + 39 059 210 118.
- ▷ Solociccia (Dario Cecchini), Via XX Luglio, 11 Pinzano in Chianti, Italy. Set menu, six meat courses for €30. Phone + 39 055 852 727.

before our entree arrived. Enchanted by the pleasant interruption, I looked at the plate laid before me. Four delicately arranged ravioli a quintro quattro topped with shaved black truffle.

I took a bite and something happened: I cried. Right there at the table, in front of everyone, I blubbed like a little kid as my mind did cartwheels and my tongue sent urgent telegrams to my brain attempting, but failing miserably, to explain what was happening in my mouth.

In cinema, this moment of epiphany is accompanied by a bright light from heaven and a chorus of angels. I got the muted interior lights of Bottura's restaurant, stunned silence from the other patrons and a gentle, knowing smile from my wife. After all these years, I finally understood.



My eyes had been opened and my view of food forever changed. Everything she had been patiently explaining to me for 10 years had been leading up to this moment. I was, for once in my life, completely speechless. That night, I dreamt of nothing but food.

We supped and dined our way through Italy for a few more weeks, enjoying local delicacies and dishes that were given a whole new spin through my new-found appreciation. Tortellini in brodo in Rome. Cotoletta a la Milanese in Milan. More pizza than I dare mention and gelato the likes of which I may never experience again.

While on a day trip through Tuscany from Florence, taking a break from the onslaught of art and culture, we "discovered" the world's most

famous butcher, Dario Cecchini, whose shop and restaurant in Panzano, Chianti, are the stuff of legend. It was at Cecchini's eatery, Solociccia, that a true Italian passion for food was not expressed through molecular gastronomy but through the far more expedient method of preparing extremely simple food extremely well.

Cecchini himself attended the restaurant at the beginning of the evening, delivering a well-rehearsed monologue at a sustained bellow while holding aloft two of the largest T-bone steaks I have ever seen.

We ate like kings that night in the presence of diners from all over the world, bonding over a shared passion for meat, meat and a bit more meat. Dante, the chef, worked the massive barbecue with the help of welding goggles and heat-proof gloves, foregoing the use of tongs completely as the bistecca he was wrangling was far too bulky.

Like all good travellers must, I learnt a great deal on this journey.

I found that language is a challenge wherever you go – and I solved an age-old riddle of linguistics. Polish, like many Eastern European languages, suffers from a shortage of vowels. I now know where they are: the errant letters are to be found in Italy, added to the end of every syllable uttered by the excitable citizens.

Most importantly, my own journey from the culinary cul-de-sac in which I lived was complete: I learnt that food can transcend the everyday and elevate the senses along with the soul and that, even with a wooden palate like mine, the delights of the world's greatest kitchens are worth leaving home to try.

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- Imagine the bustling port city that was Ephesus, linking Asia to the Mediterranean.
- Take in the natural beauty and culture of Rhodes, a jewel in the Greek archipelago.
- Live and breathe Greek history in Athens.

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- Tour by boat the Mekong Delta, the "bread basket" of Vietnam.
- Cool your heels amongst the lakes, waterfalls and forests of Dalat in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.
- Stroll amongst the lakes and green open spaces of Hanoi, "Paris of the Orient".
- Feast your eyes on more than 3000 islands scattered like jewels in the emerald waters of Halong Bay.

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