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EAT: THE ITALIAN LAKE DISTRICT

AS WELL AS ROMAN RUINS AND ALPINE VIEWS, ITALY'S LAKE DISTRICT IS BLESSED WITH A WEALTH OF VINEYARDS, FRESHWATER FISH AND RICH DAIRY PRODUCE. WORDS BY ANDREW PURVIS

ON THE 20-MINUTE drive from Verona airport to the Italian Lake District — which inspired a generation of poets — there are few signs of the natural nuggets they rhapsodised about in verse. “The lake lies dim and milky,” wrote DH Lawrence of Lake Garda, the most easterly of Italy’s inland seas (the others are Idrò, Iseo, Como, Lugano, Varese and Maggiore) adding that “the mountains are dark blue at the back... the light burns gold...” and the air is filled with “the exquisite scent of lemon flowers”. Ezra Pound, who stayed at the pastel-pink Hotel Edera in Sirmione, on Garda’s southern shore, implored James Joyce to join him and be stirred.

On the gridlocked A4 autostrada, there’s little poetry, only a grim hinterland of retail parks, factories and agricultural buildings, stretching all the way to Peschiera de Garda, where I turn off. Then suddenly, there it is: the ruffled indigo lake in all its grandeur, framed by towering peaks and, in the foreground, the promontory of Sirmione with its 13th-century castle, quaint (if touristy) town and the ruins of Grotte di Catullo, a honey-coloured villa rumoured to have been the home of the poet Catullus. Located on a clifftop scented with rosemary, herbs and wild flowers, it’s considered the most important Roman site in northern Italy.

From here, you can take a *battello* (small passenger ferry) to Bardolino, on the eastern shore of the ladel-shaped lake. At La Loggia

Rambaldi, a 16th-century building overlooking Bardolino’s small harbour, I sit in the magnificent vaulted dining room and order mussels followed by mixed grilled lake fish, with a glass of fruity, spicy Lugana white.

It’s a shame not to drink Bardolino, the red named after the town, but I fear it’ll overwhelm the perfectly cooked fish. At Ristorante Pace, in Sirmione, where I have dinner, I choose *lavaret* (whitefish) with a feisty smoked salt and horseradish mousse. On the wine menu, I turn to what the sommelier calls “the wines of our lake”: Lugana Superiore, of course, but also Soave Classico (from the Veneto, which flanks Lake Garda to the east) and Pinot Grigio (an imaginative leap, since it comes from a vineyard near Milan, over 90 miles to the south-west).

Here in Lombardy, wine-lovers are spoilt for choice because the region also embraces Franciacorta, known for its elegant, sparkling wines, double-fermented like Champagne. I ask for a glass of Franciacorta Satèn (a Blanc de Blancs whose name evokes silky smoothness) from the Bella Vista Winery, owned by the Terra Moretti Group, which also owns L’Albereta, a villa hotel near Erbusco where the legendary chef Gualtiero Marchesi has a restaurant. >>

Clockwise, from top left: Seafood platter, Sirmione; Limone, Lake Garda; Trout drying, Lake Iseo; Sirmione Castle on Lake Garda; Cured meat and pasta dishes





Images: Paul Harris and Anne Heiloper/Getty; Marco Cesari/Alamy; Brescia Tourism

FOUR PLACES FOR A TASTE OF THE LAKES

(Prices are per person)

RISTORANTE PACE LAKE GARDA

In medieval Sirmione, on the water's edge, Maura Botti creates dishes that draw on the bounty of the lake. Diners can arrive by boat at the restaurant's jetty, for an al fresco lunch or dinner in the timber-beamed dining room. Start with lake-fish soup, or *maccheroncini* with tench, followed by fillet of perch in a lemon and green-tomato sauce, or pike in sardine sauce with polenta. Meat options include goose, pigeon and baked suckling pig.

■ **How much:** Starters/mains €16-€26 (£13-22), seven-course tasting menu €55 (£47). *Piazza Porto Valentino 52, Sirmione. www.ristorantepace.it/en*

RISTORANTE DUE COLOMBE, LAKE ISEO

Two miles from Gualtiero Marchesi's culinary shrine at L'Albereta, Stefan Cerveni renders Lombard classics in a more accessible style. His signature dish is *marzo all'olio*, beef cheek boiled for hours, then simmered with oil, anchovies, garlic and onion. A close second is his creamy Grana Padano risotto with quail ragout scented with grappa, leaving room (just) for acacia honey parfait with caramelised hazelnuts and Sebino extra virgin olive oil.

■ **How much:** Set lunch €28-€38 (£24-32); starters/pasta €20-€32 (£17-27); mains €26-€35 (£22-30); tasting menus €70/€85 (£60/£72). *Via Foresti 13, Borgonato di Cortefranca. www.duecolombe.com*

LA TERRAZZA RESTAURANT LAKE COMO

This waterfront Grand Hotel Tremezzo, with views of Bellagio and the Alps, is gourmet heaven. At the fine-dining La Terrazza Restaurant, I had pink carpaccio of *salmerino* (alpine lake char) marinated in herbs with pear sauce, then *assobucco* (veal shank), slow-cooked in sauce with *gremola* (parsley, lemon, garlic). The L'Escale bar does fondues of meat, fish or seafood poached in broth, and served with fine wines.

■ **How much:** Starters/*primi* €18-€30 (£15-26), mains €26-€54 (£22-46). *Via Regina 8, Tremezzo. www.grandhoteltremezzo.com*

LOCANDA DELL'ISOLA COMACINA LAKE COMO

The spread at this simple island trattoria is unchanged since 1947. It starts with antipasto of smoked ham, *bresaola* and eight vegetables, from baked onions and sweet peppers to *scorzonera*, a white radish. Chargrilled trout follows, then fried chicker, a curl of Grana Padano, dessert, and brandy-infused coffee. On the walls, photos of Clooney, Stallone, Pitt et al suggest the formula works.

■ **How much:** €67 (£57) with wine. *Isola Comacina, off Sala Comacina village. www.comacina.it*

Now 83, he was the first non-Frenchman to be awarded three Michelin stars — for his first restaurant in Milan. His creations at L'Albereta are pure theatre; although his signature dish, saffron risotto, garnished with a square of gold leaf, is not as outlandish as it seems, but is in fact very Lombardian. In the affluent industrial north, rare and expensive ingredients such as saffron, spices, candied orange and gold were traditionally combined with common staples (rice, dairy produce, beef and veal) from the alluvial plains surrounding the River Po.

A more affordable option is Ristorante Due Colombe in Borgonate, where the talented young chef Stefano Cerveni brings new artistry to old Lombardian classics. Grana Padano, the region's grainy, crumbly Parmesan-style cheese makes an appearance in his superb risotto — as it does again at the Ca' del Bosco winery, producer of fine Franciacorta Brut, Extra Brut and Satèn. In the elegantly furnished tasting room, I sample a lot of these, accompanied by hunks of Grana Padano and thick rounds of salami.

From here, it's just a short drive to Lake Iseo, the second of the three lakes on my gastronomic Grand Tour. On its southern shore, Romantic Hotel Relais Mirabella has a terrace offering views of fjord-blue waters plied by ferries and flanked by forested peaks, with the Swiss Alps beyond. From my room, I look out

FIVE LAKELAND FOOD FINDS

■ **La Loggia Rambaldi:** Housed in a 16th-century building designed by Giulio Romano, this vaulted Bardolino restaurant on the shores of Lake Garda serves lake cuisine, Italian classics and local wine. www.laloggiarambaldi.it

■ **L'Albereta:** Near Lake Iseo, in Erbusco, this villa hotel with a spa is home to a culinary shrine, Gualtiero Marchesi's restaurant. www.albereta.it

■ **Ca' del Bosco:** This high-tech winery, with a roof like an arabesque football stadium, is among the top-notch Franciacorta producers doing tours and tastings. www.cadelbosco.com/en

■ **La Foresta:** On Monte Isola, in the middle of Lake Iseo, this restaurant with fish drying outside serves lake fish with an artisan flavour. www.forestamontisola.it

■ **Caligari Alimentari Gastronomia:** Food shop in postcard-pretty Bellagio, on Lake Como, selling vacuum-packed missoltini (lake fish), cold meats, local cheeses, exquisitely packaged sweets, Arborio rice and Aperol — a liqueur mixed with prosecco to make a spritz. T: 00 39 031950 570.

From left: Beef fondue at La Terrazza Restaurant; Gualtiero Marchesi and Osvaldo Presazzi

across lawns to the town of Iseo and its lakeside restaurants. A common starter here is *antipasto di lago*, a medley of lake fish (trout, pike, crayfish, perch, rudd) marinated, smoked or salted like anchovies, and served with polenta. *Tinca* (tench) with polenta is celebrated almost like a national dish, as is the soft, straw-coloured cow's-milk cheese *Bagòss di Bagolino*.

In the middle of Lake Iseo is Monte Isola, a car-free island with a baroque church, 15th-century fortress and a charming restaurant called La Foresta, where the lake fish are dried on racks outside. Dishes include baked trout, smoked chub on buttered toast and golden perch cooked on a wood fire.

The jewel in the region's crown is Lake Como, where I stay at the Grand Hotel Tremezzo, once a stop-off on the Grand Tour and right next door to the Villa Carlotta, a museum and botanical gardens. At the hotel's La Terrazza Restaurant, I encounter Gualtiero Marchesi again — not in person, but in the dishes created by chef Osvaldo Presazzi under the tutelage of Marchesi, a regular visitor. Next day, as an antidote to fine dining, we take the hotel's 1961 Venetian motor launch, *Ru*, to the island of Comacina, where Benvenuto Puricelli, in his tartan waistcoat, presides over a simple trattoria, Locanda dell'Isola Comacina, that has served the same set menu since 1947. If it ain't broke, don't fix it, as they say. □

Images: La Terrazza

