

DISCOVER ITALY

Haute cuisine in the Italian Dolomites

Skiers in Alta Badia this season can tuck into dishes created by some of the world's top chefs. Nicky Holford reports

Great skiing is not always matched by great food. But head to Alta Badia, in the Italian Dolomites, and prepare to loosen your belt. For the region takes food and wine at least as seriously as skiing – Alta Badia has three Michelin-starred restaurants – and you can combine all three in a gastronomic ski safari, sampling dishes specially created by some of the world's top chefs for 12 of Alta Badia's mountain refuges.

To launch Slope Food, the mountain version of street food, the chefs all spent a day cooking in the hut in which their dish would be served. So on the designated day last December, as fresh snow coated the dramatic jagged peaks of the Dolomites, I set off to meet the chefs and sample a dish in six of the mountain refuges.

The first stop was Utia I Tabla, a small, cosy refuge at 2,040m, surrounded by pine forests and the towering peaks of the Col di Lana. There we were greeted by numerous chefs in white uniforms headed by Arturo Spicocchi of the Michelin-starred restaurant La Stua de Michil at Hotel La Perla in Corvara. His dish was cooked Pig's Cheek browned in South Tyrolean honey on a potato and horseradish foam with crispy South Tyrolean speck (traditional bacon). The accompanying wine was a glass of an Alto Adige Santa Maddalena. It was an exciting mix of flavours, and not a bad early morning tippie.

Gloves, hat and goggles

on, we hit the slopes again to work up an appetite. Next was the dish created by the British chef John Burton-Race at the Piz Arlara refuge. His choice, after much deliberation and cooking at high altitude, was South Tyrolean beef, speck and apple pastry. "It's really a pastie," he told us modestly while we sipped a South Tyrolean lagrein. "Everything has to be local and not a seasonal dish. And you are supposed to be able to eat it standing up..."

You could certainly do that with Norbert Niederkofler's cones. We found the two-star Michelin chef of the St Hubertus in San Cassiano posing for photographs at the Bioch refuge. Huge snowflakes coated his creation: the Marmolada Gourmet, a tartar of char with creamed potatoes and lemon, Graukase cheese foam and white onion braised in white wine vinegar, served in a cone, with crispy South Tyrolean speck, cucumber and horseradish. It seemed rude not to try the accompanying Alto Adige gewürztraminer.

The South Tyrol produces many award-winning wines, most of which are reasonably priced but hard to find in Britain because the vineyards are quite small. In March there is a wine-tasting ski safari in which you can try many of these great wines, including Masseto, Chateau Petrus and Cheval Blanc.

By the time we left Bioch the scattering of snowflakes had turned into a heavy



Peak performance: Norbert Niederkofler with his Slope Food cones, above; and his restaurant, the St Hubertus in San Cassiano, above right. Top, skiers work up an appetite

snowfall. Fortunately the skiing was not too challenging and by staying close to the trees we had quite good visibility.

Next, we swept into the warmth of the Ciampai hut where Fabio Cucchelli, of the Michelin-starred La Siriola, just outside San Cassiano, welcomed us with treats of creamed dried cod, polenta and crispy South Tyrolean speck, complemented by pinot bianco, from the South Tyrol.

By now it was late afternoon and we still had

two refuges to go. Fortunately, the last two chefs, Lorenzo Cogo from El Coq in Marano, and Vicentino and Matteo Vigotti from Peck in Milan, were both at the Club Moritzino, conveniently close to the gondola home.

Early the next morning, we set out to sample another of the region's food initiatives: Breakfast on the Peak, served at two refuges. Just before sunrise we clambered into a snowcat, our skis in a metal basket in front. We reached the Las Vegas refuge just as the sun coated the peaks of the mountains in ribbons of pink.

This elegant hut was built by the former ski racer Ulli Crattolave. His individuality and love of nature seems embedded



in the stone, glass and huge wooden beams of this spectacular refuge. Breakfast was a feast fit for kings.

By the time we had finished eating, the sky was a cloudless, piercing blue. We put on our skis and set off; we were the only ones on the mountain, and had fresh tracks on a wide, gloriously groomed piste.

The next day we skied the Sella Ronda, starting in Corvara, where Alta Badia meets the Sella Ronda circuit. It's also home to Arturo Spicocchi's Michelin-starred restaurant – yes, more food – La Stua de Michil.

You can ski the Sella Ronda in both directions. Clockwise is quicker with more variety of slopes and fewer lifts and you can ski it in a day, but

it is usually more crowded, especially at peak times and weekends. But there are many alternatives and it is worth taking a guide to explore off the beaten track. If you take the first cable car from Passo di Falzarego to Lagazuoi it is likely you will be the first on the piste, often without a soul in sight. This 11km red run suits intermediate skiers – it's a journey through spectacular scenery, descending to a pine forest and then to Armentarola and San Cassiano.

We stopped at the Rifugio Scotoni before getting a ski tow by a horse-drawn sled to the drag lift at Armentarola. Our gourmet trip was over but it had certainly proved that sometimes great skiing is matched by great food.

Essentials

GETTING THERE

British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Venice, from £49 one way. BA also flies from Heathrow to Innsbruck from £67 one way. EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies from Gatwick to Venice from £36 one way.

PACKAGES

Powder Byrne (020 8246 5300; powderbyrne.com) offers seven nights in a junior suite at the Rosa Alpina, San Cassiano, departing on March 3, from £3,080 per person, including return flight from Heathrow to Venice and transfers. Inghams (01483 791114; inghams.co.uk) offers seven nights' half board at the Chalet Hotel Al Pigher, La Villa, from £494 per person, including return flight from Gatwick to Innsbruck and transfers.

THE INSIDE TRACK

• Slope Food is served at 12 mountain refuges in Alta Badia this season. Dishes start at £6/£5, including wine. Find a full list of those taking part at altabadia.org.
• The next Gourmet Ski Safari takes place on December 15 2013 and costs £40/£33
• Breakfast on the Peaks is at Col Alto (0039 0471 836324) on Tuesday and Thursday and Las Vegas (0471 840138) on Wednesday and Friday. Cost £15/£12.50.
• The Santa Croce Ski Tour is a chance to try Ladin cuisine and local wine. The tour includes stops at farmhouses and the church of Santa Croce at the foot of Mount Santa Croce. Details at altabadia.org.
• The Wine Ski Safari is a chance to try the wines of the South Tyrol at several refuges and takes place on March 17 2013. Cost is £20/£16.

THE BEST HOTELS

Al Pigher Chalet Hotel, La Villa ££
Small (sleeps 32-42) and comfortable and 10 minutes' walk from the main gondola. Rooms are light and reasonably sized, some with balconies. There's a small bar with free Wi-Fi (book through Inghams; see Packages).

Las Vegas Lodge, Piz Sorega £££
Quirky but elegant refuge owned by Ulli Crattolave, a skier of much fame, who will pick you up by skidoo. Excellent food (0471 840138; lasvegasonline.it; doubles from £172/£143, including dinner and skidoo transfers).

WHAT TO AVOID

• Tight fitting clothes. Pack loose clothing; no matter how disciplined and constrained you may be this destination is guaranteed to increase your waistline. But remember Italians always dress up.
• Some of the local and homemade grappas can be extremely strong; a less alcoholic choice is a Hugo, an aperitif made from Prosecco and elderflower, good for pacing yourself.
• Paying full price for lift passes by booking online at dolomitisuperski.com. The Dolomiti Superski pass covers 12 resorts, including Cortina d'Ampezzo, and costs around £200 for six days.

Rosa Alpina, San Cassiano ££££

Beautiful five-star hotel and spa with a two Michelin-starred restaurant, owned and run by the same family since 1850. The 51 rooms and suites are all individually and elegantly designed (0471 849500; rosaalpina.it; doubles from €515/£428 b&b).

THE BEST RESTAURANTS

Rifugio Comici, Selva £££
An anomaly in the mountains – a top restaurant serving fresh fish, lobster and langoustine. Beware of what looks like a miniature petrol pump on the table – it's filled with grappa. Reservations essential (0333 595 9277; rifugiocomici.com).

Club Moritzino, Piz la Ila £££

A lively restaurant at the top of La Villa gondola. Salad may not sound inspiring but when a selection of flowers, fruit and herbs are prepared by Michelin chef Lorenzo Cogo and accompanied by an Alto Adige sauvignon it's much more than just a salad. There's usually a DJ (0471 847403; moritzino.it).

St Hubertus, Rosa Alpina, San Cassiano ££££

A consultation with the two-star Michelin chef Norbert Niederkofler will determine how far out of your comfort zone you are willing to travel. The foie gras creme brûlée and grey cheese gelato sounded a bit too far to me, but they were sensational. But there's plenty on the menu to tempt those with less adventurous palates (0471 849500; rosaalpina.it).

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