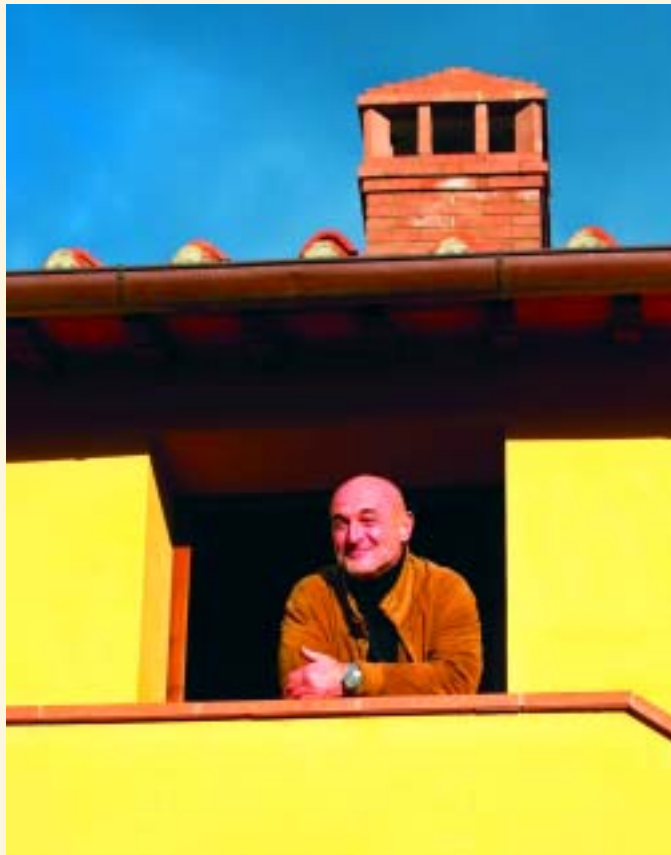


STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS  
STEPHEN ASHTON

## The Slow Food Way *Ancient Tastes of Tuscany*



While in Florence for the annual *Festival dei Popoli*, the prestigious and committed 44 year old (the world's first) documentary film festival, I happened upon a curious brochure that enigmatically described "*Antichi Sapori di Toscana*" – A Forum and Festival of **Ancient Tastes of Tuscany**. Upon investigation I learned that this event, now in its 10th edition, spans three days and has been always dedicated to the experience of traditional Tuscan cuisine, foods and wines of the region.

This was too good to pass up! I quickly made some arrangements, changed my plane ticket (not so easily done in Italy) and boarded a bus for the little town of Lastra a Signa just twenty minutes away. By the time I arrive, the December Tuscan sun had set. I was greeted by Manila, the director of the Tourist Office,



A beautiful Tuscan view from the window of the Villa Calcinaia.

and we went off on foot through the narrow streets in the old town. Lastra a Signa was a favorite place for the genius sculptor and architect **Filippo Brunelleschi** who designed and built the freestanding *Cupola of the Duomo* (Dome of the Cathedral) in Florence. Brunelleschi's contributions to Lastra a Signa include the still standing magnificent 550 year old stone city walls and towers.

Adjacent to the 15th Century wall is a large tent which houses the Ristorante "Antichi Sapori" that is operated by volunteer chefs and

servers. Long tables are filled with mostly local gastronomes...I am honored to be the only foreign journalist or for that matter the only North American at the event.

I am delighted to discover that this year, for the first time, the town-sponsored event has teamed up with the Italy-based **Slow Food** movement. I had previously known about the Slow Food movement...or thought I knew. I understood Slow Food to be organized into "**Convivia**" – groups that get together for extended meals...plenty of time to savor the nuances of every course. "Ah," I said, "this is going to be fun!"

What I soon find is that Slow Food is indeed all that and more! The event intends to make the experience not only one of tasting traditional dishes, but a celebration of foods that have been on the verge of extinction! Through a series of remarkable events (see accompanying article on the Slow Food Movement) and the vision of Italian writer/philosopher **Carlo Petrini**, nearly all of the foods tasted at the Antichi Sapori di Toscana have not only been identified in an official capacity, or "preserved" in a small way, but more importantly, are re-established as commercially viable enterprises known as "**Presidia**." These **Presidia** initiatives work hand in hand with the **Ark of Taste**, which you will learn about in this article. I am now prepared to enjoy the tastes of ancient Tuscany the Slow Food Way.

Stephen Ashton travels the world in search of independent films to be featured at his Wine Country Film Festival, held in the Napa and Sonoma regions of northern California each summer. His love of food and culture leads him into great escapades that he translates into stories for Food and Beverage International magazine. We welcome your comments.



Ancient Brunelleschi Walls of Lastra a Signa



**Pecorino Cheese with Chestnut Honey**



**Pappardelle**  
 Fresh homemade wide pasta



**Ribollita**  
 Reheated Tuscan Bread Soup

## ARK OF TASTE

In keeping with Slow Food's commitment to biodiversity, preservation of endangered cuisine and the cultures that they represent, Slow Food established a symbolic "Ark of Taste" ("ark" as in "Noah's") "into" which endangered food and agricultural products – and especially almost forgotten "flavors" – can be "placed." Such a process is akin to an animal or bird being listed on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service "Endangered Species List" in that simply by declaring a plant or animal as "endangered" sets in motion a conscious effort to find ways to preserve the species.

In this case, the aim of the Slow Food Ark of Taste is to rediscover, catalogue, describe and promote these almost forgotten flavors, including certain recipes and cooking techniques that are in danger of slipping away. So it is appropriate for the "Ancient Tastes" event to showcase many of these foods. But in order for these foods and flavors to not only be preserved, but to be accessible to the public, Slow Food developed initiatives known as **The Presidia** – from the Latin meaning "to protect" or "garrison" – which are economic support entities (consortia of farmers, trade groups, marketing organizations) that create sustainable futures for the special foods, animals and precious flavors in all parts of the world.

### Appetizer

My first dinner at Antichi Sapori is all based on dishes – some age old – of the traditional Tuscan farm and many of them are foods that have been symbolically "taken into" The Ark and now have "**Presidia**" enterprises to support them. The meal starts with a delicious Antipasti of **Pecorino Cheese with Honey** and a **Vegetable Frittatini**. **Pecorino** Cheeses from the mountains of Pistoia are special in that they must be made only from raw un-pasteurized sheep milk by family farmers with 100 year old methods. The sheep are of a certain breed – the **Massese** – which have dark spiraling horns and black fleece. Cheeses each seem to have their "soul mates" of certain foods and wines, and Pecorino's soul mate is **Castagna** (Chestnut) Honey, which has a strong bitter-sweet flavor that is killer with the "**Abbucciato**" (firm but not dried) Pecorino. The Tuscan **Frittatini** (little Frittata) or small omelet that is typically served cold is in this case spiked with chunks of potatoes and green vegetables. Matched with the Pecorino and Castagna Honey, it provides a delicious combination of flavors that whets the appetite for the next course.

### The Primi Piatti

(First Course) is a delicious **Pappardelle** (fresh homemade wide pasta) with ragu that is generously endowed with succulent Rabbit. Actually, the traditional Tuscan table features very little pasta, with the exception of Pappardelle. But rather the famous Tuscan bread is what is used in a

myriad of dishes... especially if it is a bit stale! Tuscan cuisine has been best described as a "Bread Based Cuisine." So our next dish is a deeply flavored typical old Tuscan delicacy, **Ribollita** – or reheated Tuscan bread soup. Ribollita means re-boiled and it is really **Minestra di Pane** (Bread Soup) that has aged a day or so and is reheated after the flavors have had a chance to sink in and marry. The soup is typically made with black leaf kale, pre-soaked white beans, onion, carrot, celery and parsley, olive oil, a bit of tomato paste, shredded beet greens, potatoes, seasoning of salt, pepper and fresh thyme, and thinly sliced day old Tuscan bread. After cooking the vegetables, place the bread in layers in a terracotta oven-ready pot and cover each layer with the vegetable soup and olive oil.

Over dinner, I am briefed on the role of Slow Food in the current festivities, and prepared for the coming days when we will learn how to prepare nearly lost dishes and taste the products of some of the more than 25 Tuscan Presidia.

### Secondi Piatti

(The Main Course) is served with great excitement because the aromas of the **Pollo e Coniglio in Umido**, (Rabbit and Chicken Stew,) which has been cooking for the last hour, wafted through the room enticing us. The traditional Tuscan kitchen is blessed with the bounty of its global traders, including a myriad of seasonings. According to the writer/historian Marco Lolli, many of the once common wonderful fragrances that came from the Tuscan kitchen have "almost disappeared." The **Antichi Sapori** event reintroduces many of the spices and seasonings including **pepolino** (thyme), **persia** (sweet marjoram), **nepitella** (calamint), **menta** (mint), **salvia** (sage), **ramerino** (rosemary), and **parsley**. Also used are **Finocchio** (fennel) seeds, **chiogi di garofano** (cloves), **canella** (cinnamon), and most dishes are well peppered. **Peperoncino** (red chili pepper), **cipolla** (onion), **scalogno** (shallot), **porro** (leek) and **zenzero** (ginger) are part of the mix as well, but the main aromatic is, not surprisingly, **aglio** (garlic).

The Stew is served with a side dish of **White Beans with Olive Oil and Salad**. Tuscan cuisine will find many traditional dishes made with the nutty flavored **Cannellini White Bean**, which is said to have originated in Argentina. These old farm recipes, are amongst Italy's most hardy and tasty dishes.

For dessert we have **Cenci** pastries – literally "rags," these light fried pastries are especially tasty when dipped in 5 year old **Vin Santo** Dessert Wine. The light pastries are made with flour, sugar, egg, bicarbonate of soda, vin santo and flavored with aniseed, vanilla and orange skin zest and dusted after frying with confectioners sugar.





**Polle e Coniglio in Umido**  
(Rabbit and Chicken Stew)

Luckily I am able to get into a sold-out workshop on the preparation of a rare Tuscan delicacy – **Roventino**. Although it sounds as if this dish should be from the murky forests of Count Dracula's Transylvania, this fried pig blood frittatine dates back to the Florentine middle-ages and is quite delicious. The workshop, attended by Slow Food aficionados, is about to start when I enter the community center kitchen. We learn that this nutritious dish is in danger of becoming extinct because the Art of Butchering in the old way is being lost.

It is now virtually illegal in Italy to have a small local butcher shop that can slaughter as well as cut fresh meat. Roventino requires fresh blood, which is impossible to purchase, so the only chance to taste is if you happen upon a farm-raised pig at slaughter time... and the farmer is willing to share the treasure. The workshop moves into the kitchen where the tradition is passed on from the farmers and chefs to us. We learn how to prepare and cook this unique dish.

### Preparation of Roventino

Into a liter (in our case, a big pot, so everything was proportionate) of fresh pig blood, whisk in two tablespoons of plain white flour that has been dissolved in vegetable broth, and a couple of pinches of salt, pepper, minced garlic, grated lemon peel, fresh rosemary and a pinch of ground nutmeg.

#### Procedure:

Into a small red hot frying pan put some lard, melt on a high flame. Then put a small ladleful of blood into the pan and LEAVE IT until the surface bubbles and slightly blackens. Then the fun part! Each "frittatine" (almost the consistency of a pancake) must be individually flipped! This takes some practice, so expect to miss the pan a few times. I am lucky and my first try turns out pretty good!



**Cenci Pastries**

After cooking the other side for a minute or two, slide the Roventino onto a plate, sprinkle with parmigiano reggiano or aged hard Pecorino cheese and serve HOT. This tasty, hard to find, winter dish gives new meaning to the Tuscan phrase "We use every part of the pig but the squeal!"



**Steve making Roventino**

So by this time the idea of this event is beginning to sink in. I now appreciate the importance of putting nearly extinct dishes onto the gastronomic "Endangered Species List" known as The Ark Of Tastes. We all head over to the Spedale di Sant'Antonio, a beautifully designed 15th Century building consisting of a series of seven arches made from the stone that Lastra a Signa is famous for. The building originated as a Hospital ("spedale"), more in the sense of offering hospitality in the form of a resting place for travelers. Since the 15th century travelers were provided bread, wine, vegetables from Guild gardens, and a place to sleep. Since Lastra a Signa was on an important trade route, it was the Consoli dell'Arte della Seta (Consuls of the Silk Guild) that had the



**Roventino**  
A Rare Tuscan Delicacy

building designed by Florentine master architects – in fact, many argue that it too was designed by the famed Brunelleschi. These endeavors and beneficial services, started nearly 600 years ago, are the result of enlightened cooperation between business interests, religious orders and the municipality. In fact, this historic project is a model for today's cooperative activities not just in this lovely little town, but in the Florentine and Tuscan regions in general. Tuscany has through the ages been at the vanguard of progressive humanist thought and human rights. On November 30th, 1786, Tuscany became the first State in the Western world to pass an Act banning torture and capital punishment. And Tuscany today is the leader in the movement towards "Sustainable Agriculture and Biodiversity."

The tradition of compassion and social responsibility continues in Lastra a Signa with the Antichi Saperi event: it includes an "EcoFest" with a special symposium called "Water For Peace," that tackles Global Water Issues in honor of the International Year of Water. The dining tent is decorated with huge panels that illustrate the problems and propose solutions. A major figure in the Antichi Saperi event is the 49 year old Mayor of Lastra a Signa, Carlo Moscardini, a visionary who has enrolled a number of his colleagues from 9 neighboring villages to participate in a project that provides drinking water for villages in "The South" (South Italy and especially third world villages of the Southern Hemisphere) that suffer from drought. "We are blessed to live in the rich North," Mayor Moscardini says, "but we have a moral duty to the poor in The South. We raised 900,000 euros (over one million \$US) for food and water projects in South Africa. We need to cultivate sustainable ideas for an equitable society as well as wonderful foods."



**Mallegato Sanguinaccio**  
 Blood Sausage



**Prato Mortadella**  
 A sausage for the use of leftover meats



**Palamita Fish**



**Mountain Pecorino Cheeses**

## THE PRESIDIA OF SLOW FOOD

As we approach the elegant arches (decidedly not “golden”) of the Spedale di Sant’Antonio, aromas of the rescued foods of the Presidi waft through the air. Products ranging from raw sheep-milk **Mountain Pecorino Cheeses**; delicious dried meats like **Mallegato Sanguinaccio**, or blood sausage made with pieces of lard, nutmeg, cinnamon, pinenuts and thickened with water-soaked bread; and **Prato Mortadella**, a large diameter sausage from Prato that came into being in Tuscany as a means of using up leftover cured meats and the poorer cuts of pork. Among the featured food enterprises are rare animals such as the **Valdarno Chicken**, which has been preserved by the diligent efforts of Francesca Romana Farina and her associates from Montevarchi in the Tuscan province of Arezzo, and the **Palamita fish** (a kind of Tuna) of the Tuscan Archipelago Islands. This wonderful fish is served fresh, dried, smoked, and preserved. But it is the Mediterranean **Bottarga** (grey mullet) roe that is particularly prized. Harvested whole and preserved in their original sac, the roe has been a delicacy since ancient times. The name Bottarga is said to have evolved from the Arabic phrase for raw fish eggs: “bot-ah-rik.” The art of preserving fish and roe is nowhere more developed than in Orbetello in the Tuscan province of Grosseto and the Archipelagos.

One of the arched halls housed an **Enoteca** (Wine Store) offering tastings of Florentine and regional wines from small family wineries. Although most of the Presidi foods are pricy, appreciative patrons sampled and bought for three days, providing encouragement to these committed food producers.

## TO THE ARK!

So by this time the idea of this event is beginning to sink in. I now appreciate the importance of putting nearly extinct dishes onto the gastronomic “Endangered Species List” known as The Ark Of Tastes. We all head over to the **Spedale di Sant’Antonio**, a beautifully designed 15th Century building consisting of a series of seven arches made from the stone that Lastra a Signa is famous for. The building originated as a Hospital (“spedale”), more in the sense of offering hospitality in the form of a resting place for travelers. Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century travelers were provided bread, wine, vegetables from Guild gardens, and a place to sleep. Since Lastra a Signa was on an important trade route, it was the **Consoli dell’Arte della Seta (Consuls of the Silk Guild)** that had the building designed by Florentine master architects – in fact, many argue that it too was designed by the famed Brunelleschi. These endeavors and beneficial services, started nearly 600 years ago, are the result of enlightened cooperation between business interests, religious orders and the municipality. In fact, this historic project is a model for today’s cooperative activities not just in this lovely little town, but in the Florentine and Tuscan regions in general. Tuscany has through the ages been at the vanguard of progressive humanist thought and human rights. On November 30th, 1786, Tuscany

became the first State in the Western world to pass an Act banning torture and capital punishment. And Tuscany today is the leader in the movement towards “Sustainable Agriculture and Biodiversity.”

The tradition of compassion and social responsibility continues in Lastra a Signa with the Antichi Sapori event: it includes an “EcoFest” with a special symposium called “Water For Peace,” that tackles Global Water Issues in honor of the **International Year of Water**. The dining tent is decorated with huge panels that illustrate the problems and propose solutions. A major figure in the Antichi Sapori event is the 49 year old Mayor of Lastra a Signa, **Carlo Moscardini**, a visionary who has enrolled a number of his colleagues from 9 neighboring villages to participate in a project that provides drinking water for villages in “The South” (South Italy and especially third world villages of the Southern Hemisphere) that suffer from drought. “We are blessed to live in the rich North,” Mayor Moscardini says, “but we have a moral duty to the poor in The South. We raised 900,000 euros (over one million \$US) for food and water projects in South Africa. We need to cultivate sustainable ideas for an equitable society as well as wonderful foods.”



**“EcoFest”**

A special symposium called Water For Peace”



**Spedale di Sant’Antonio**



**Carlo Moscardini**



On to dinner at Ristorante “Antichi Sapori” where Roventino is again served with a tasty and hearty dish – **Pappa al pomodoro** – A typical Tuscan “Children’s Food.” This vegetable soup or stew, based on day-old stale Tuscan bread soaked in chicken or beef stock or water for 10 minutes, then cooked with tomato, basil, garlic and olive oil, is perfect to take the chill off a winter evening.

This is followed by **Pennette al ragù di salsiccia** (Penne with Sausage Ragù), followed by a succulent **Arista con L’Osso e Rape** (Roast Pork flank with Rape). The name of this dish, “Arista” dates back to 1430’s Papal Council in Florence when the ecumenical council attempted to settle differences between the Greek and Roman Churches. The Florentines, known even then for their fine cuisine, served their guests roast pork loin with garlic and rosemary inserted in holes made in the meat and seasoned with salt, pepper and spices. The Greeks exclaimed “Arista, arista!” (The Best, the best!) and the name of the dish stuck. The green rape is tossed in the juices of the roast.

Topping off the meal is a rich dessert of **Torta al Semolino** (Chocolate Semolina Torte).



**Arista con L’Osso e Rape**



The Slow Food Laboratory of Taste features the Valdarno Chicken

## THE VALDARNO CHICKEN

The next day is another educational forum at the “Laboratory of Taste,” this time devoted to the free range breed of Valdarno Chicken and the unique dishes made from it. Francesca Romana Farina, who returned to farming after completing studies in archeology, is now a leader of the Presidium. Francesca considers herself, and a number of other professionals who have returned to small family farms in Tuscany, a “custodians of the breed.” She tells us that this slow growing chicken was originally raised by the sharecroppers of the Arno Valley and the hens and eggs actually became a form of currency. It is a lean chicken with thin



**Collo di Pollo Ripieno**  
 Stuffed Chicken Neck paired with chopped egg, parsley, capers and garlic pate on toast

skin and runs freely through the olive groves, vineyards (except during harvest) and in the forest. It takes at least 10 square meters of open land for each bird, so the preservation of the breed also impacts land use in general. Valdarnese eggs are higher in Omega 3’s than commercial eggs.

The first dish we taste in the “Laboratory” this afternoon is a chopped egg, parsley, capers and garlic patê on toast with olive oil; then chopped chicken liver on toast and a true Tuscan treasure, Collo di Pollo Ripieno or Stuffed Chicken Neck.

The Collo di Pollo Ripieno recipe is fairly simple, but great care must be taken to not tear the chicken neck skin.

You need a chicken neck with the head on to be traditional. Tie the beak closed. Singe off any pinfeathers and debone the neck. In a bowl mix an egg, a pinch of salt and nutmeg. Then add pre-browned finely minced chicken livers, parsley, garlic, lemon peel, the soft part of a thick slice of Tuscan bread which has been soaked in milk, and a healthy spoonful of parmigiano reggiano. Mix it well and CAREFULLY stuff the neck and sew the base closed. Simmer the works in boiling broth for 30 to 40 minutes, let it cool and then slice and serve cold.



Mara Fortuna



Veronique Nah & Sergio Staino



Taranterra Dance Group

Our next dish is a fine Medieval cream chicken soup, Zuppa di Tarlati, is made with the Valdarno Chicken from a recipe of Guido Tarlati, 13th century bishop and fierce nobleman of Arezzo. Serve hot with a toasted slice of Tuscan bread and extra virgin olive oil.

And the Laboratory concludes with a serving of the delicious Pistoia Pecorino Raw Sheep Milk Cheeses in three variations: "Pecorino Fresco," a "fresh" cheese aged only 7 to 20 days. It has to be made within 2 hours of the sheep's milking because the milk is un-pasteurized. The distinctly flavored "Pecorino Abbucciato" - aged 35 to 80 days; and "Pecorino Asserbo" which is harder and aged from 3 to 18 months. The fresh cheeses are excellent with bitter Chestnut Honey while the more aged cheeses are wonderful paired with a Chianti Classico or Brunello di Montalcino. It is particularly interesting to note that the cheeses differ according to the seasons because of what grasses are available to the mountain Massese sheep.

We manage to drive down the wine road a bit to an elegant Villa, the "Madonnina del Chiaro" Damiani that houses a small winery where travelers can find rooms as part of Tuscany's "Agriturismo" services. Some of the areas best views are seen from their well appointed rooms. As the day turns to night we drive to the grand finale of the event...



**Zuppa di Tarlati**

A creamed Medieval chicken soup made with the Valdarno chicken

## THE GRAND FINALE: DINNER AT CARUSO'S



The Grand Finale Dinner at Caruso's

The legendary opera singer Enrico Caruso discovered the 16<sup>th</sup> century **Bellosguardo Villa** and made it his own in 1906, but it would take years for him to fully realize his vision for its palatial halls and gardens. Now it is owned by the town of Lastra a Signa and is used for performances, events and dinners like the **Closing Slow Food Feast** of the Antichi Sapori. This meal is a little different than those of the previous three days however, because it is based on the Flavors of the Mediterranean. In true Slow Food form, the dinner is multi-media affair, with the presentation of a spicy new book by **Mara Fortuna "Sapori Mediterranei"** with illustrations by renowned artist **Sergio Staino**, readings from the book by actress **Veronique Nah**, and stirring song, music and dance performances of "**Terra D'Amore**" by the group "**Taranterra**" from Naples. The highlight of the evening is multi-course meal of traditional dishes celebrating the biodiversity of **Campania** in the south of Italy (on the Amalfi Coast) by Chef **Lucio Pio Romano**.

