



PHOTO THIS SPREAD  
Varenna, Lake Como.

RAY IN MANILA



WHERE ON EARTH

# Northern Italy *The Lake Effect*

by ELYSE GLICKMAN

MANY TRAVELLERS ARE FAMILIAR with the towns and cities around Lake Como because of its many Michelin Star restaurants and enduring celebrity appeal. However, to experience the fibre of its sophisticated farm-to-table food culture, you have to go to the source...or sources.»

«THE SWATH OF LAND constituting Italy's "Lake District" begets a specific yet diverse bounty of crops and foodstuffs. It runs along the Italian/Swiss border and cradles Lake Como, Lake Garda, Lake Maggiore and several smaller lakes in Piedmont, Lombardy, Brescia, Veneto and Trentino-Alto Adige. It adds up to producers, restaurateurs and chefs yielding a fascinating range of regional cuisines.

While meat and poultry are readily available, lake fish such as trout, perch, char and whitefish are the proteins of choice among the region's chefs. With over 800 rice producers thriving in Northern Italy, risotto takes on many forms that vary dramatically by location and season. The same holds true with pasta, polenta and gnocchi. The home-grown olive oils chefs cook with and serve at every meal are produced in small batches influenced by microclimates and terroir.



ELYSE GLICKMAN

## Lake Como

I SETTLE INTO the Hilton Lake Como a few hours before my nine-day tour around Lakes Como, Garda and Maggiore begins. The hotel, partially built into a former silk factory, is a sumptuous homage to Como's history as a silk production region. Public areas are decorated with contemporary Italian furnishings rendered in rich silk-inspired hues. Floor-to-ceiling windows and a rooftop terrace embody what makes Lake Como a timeless luxury travel destination and second home for Hollywood celebrities and business titans.

Hotel bar Taffeta and full-service restaurant Satin are also silk-inspired, and breakfast service is still in full swing



MAGORZATA BAJAJSKA

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Bottega Comacini Chef Danilo Vella; Italy's lake region is renowned for its beauty; Ristorante Crotto dei Platani interior; Ristorante Crotto dei Platani's star attraction — white fish tartare with black truffle.

at 10 am on a Tuesday morning. The siren call of aromas wafting out of Satin is too strong to resist. The Hilton Lake Como breakfast spread is elevated in presentation, buffet offerings (healthy juice shots, yogurt parfaits, thick-cut bacon), and made-to-order menu items. The clientele is discerning about food, and the impressive cocktail program and rooftop Terrazza reflect this.

Walking around Como city centre to see its renowned cathedral and architecture helps build an appetite for Bottega Comacini. The ambiance and menu have a decidedly youthful vibe, thanks to chef Danilo Vella. Crowd-pleasing appetizers include *Fruittura di Pesce* and *Frittura di Terra* (fried local whitefish and vegetables, respectively), and inspired appetizer sandwiches — freshly baked milk bread rolls stuffed with different fillings such as *Polpo* (octopus) and Olive; Bologna and Pistachio; and Canadian lobster with cheese, chives and grapefruit — that provide a sense of the menu's range. Vella's four dessert *botteghinos* are equal parts simple and imaginative, with a choice of banana, toffee, and salted peanuts; goat ricotta and pears; tiramisu filling; and chocolate-pistachio on the same bread.

As devised by its founders, Crotto dei Platani in Brienzzo is every bit a "lifestyle" restaurant. It is designed to handle everything from date night dining to large business gatherings and well-to-do Lake Como residents sailing in for a bite. The restaurant also offers romantic boat dinners, cooking classes and special themed evenings. When Francesco Cavadini took over the restaurant from his parents, even with subtle pressure to keep things fresh, he was determined to honour the location's 200-year legacy and a culinary foundation built on locally sourced lake fish, vegetables and organic foodstuffs.

Francesco, who is also an assessor for the Lake Como Tourism office, appreciates that operating in an eighteenth-century building with a storied past helps promote local culture and history. Like the dishes coming out of the kitchen, the building has been adapted through the generations. It was a wine shop in its early years, converted into a guest house during the nineteenth century, and has a wine cave that was first extensively renovated in 1918.

The meal starts with a parade of appetizers that include house-made salumi with giardiniera, *Mondegini di Cavedano* (lake fish meatballs) with fried veggies and tartar sauce, a lake fish antipasti platter, grilled octopus with chickpea cream and Sicilian-style pesto, and several artfully arranged foie gras platters. Whitefish tartare with black truffle is a star attraction. Cavadini says he came up with the idea in light of the popularity of fish tartare dishes and black truffles, which he found harmonized with freshly caught Lake Como whitefish.

"Experimentation should be about finding the best flavour profiles rather than creating something trendy," Cavadini states, noting that his parents came from other professions before taking over the restaurant around 1977. "(We are) telling our story through every ingredient, which has its own origin and process before it is worked into the recipe. This is why it's important to create dishes that look good and taste better. We are in this for the long run... especially as so many nouvelle cuisine restaurants have come and gone."



ELYSE GLICKMAN

As secondi like ravioli with bottarga and leeks and mains such as sturgeon with a coating of licorice, found their way to the table, Cavadini says he makes it a point to go fishing with a professional fisherman to understand the nuances of catching and harvesting the Italian lakes' bounty. The anecdote, naturally, imparts an additional appreciation for the dishes that are specific to the restaurant yet built upon long-standing traditions.

The next morning begins with touring Lake Como by boat, viewing the facades of celebrity-owned homes, and exploring Villa del Balbianello, home of Italian explorer»



ELYSE GLICKMAN



MIRAMECHTLEY



RISTORANTE SALICE BLU



PAOLO MARGARI

«Guido Monzino, transformed into a museum. Two hours is dedicated to exploring Bellagio, awash with shops offering my favourite non-edible treats (silk and leather accessories, handbags, and belts). For lunch we drive a few minutes into the woods to Ristorante Salice Blu, surrounded by rustic yet impeccably maintained vegetable, herb and ornamental gardens. Luigi Gandola, its charismatic celebrity chef/owner, appears a few moments after his mother, Flora, shows us to our seats.

Gandola's establishment is a fairytale castle of sorts, with antique cooking and gardening implements, awards, and other food-related paraphernalia covering the indoor and outdoor spaces. The presence of Flora adds to the magic as she co-founded the restaurant in 1973 with Gandola's father and is still intent on making sure every detail is in place. Growing up in this setting not only dominates Gandola's cheerful and passionate approach to cooking, but also his buoyant outlook on penning best-selling cookbooks, presenting dishes to the guests, environmental projects to protect the area, and activities such as truffle hunting, food tours and cooking lessons.

Gandola took over as chef in 2005 and has managed the restaurant, its vision, and its food experiences outside the restaurant with Camila, his wife and partner, since 2022. While his plating and serving style is modern, the foundations of the dishes stay true to what people have loved about Como cuisine for years. Highlights include a savoury risotto topped with lake perch and a roast with fresh asparagus presented in a glass dome, allowing the dish to absorb aromatic and flavourful smoke from the wood where the meat was grilled.

“The flexibility of the menu is emphasized, with our dishes being reinvented based on the availability of ingredients, ensuring a unique dining experience that creates memories for the guests,” Gandola explains. As he speaks, Camila perfectly choreographs the presentation of squash soup, the first of six courses. “It reflects the availability of local fish, with dishes created based on what is caught that day, as well as what is ready to enjoy from our garden.”

## Lake Garda

LAKE GARDA'S VIBE is as down-to-earth as Lake Como's is about refinement. This is evidenced by a high concentration of racing yachts in the marinas, challenging hike and bike paths, and hotels such as Garda Bike Hotel catering to serious cyclists. Ciclocollection and the Madonna del Ghisallo Church, dedicated to cycling history and rare bicycles are key attractions straddling sports and culture. Just inside Peschiera del Garda's city gate, a picturesque stretch of outdoor cafes along its main canal is populated with customers who have just completed their day's adventures.

En route to Peschiera del Garda, we cut through a small corner of Trentino-Alto Adige for a stop at Azienda Agricola Madonna delle Vittorie. Under its umbrella, one will find Marzadro Distillery, a winery, olive oil production facility, a restaurant, and the church it gets its name from, tucked into a small, fertile valley partially shielded by impressive cliffs. It was founded in 1949 as a way for Alessandro Marzadro's grandparents to rebuild their lives and fortunes after World War II.

The company now owns 50 hectares of land, with 25 on the property and 25 rented to other grape growers with long-term contracts. Its winery is located on the north shore of Lake Garda, while its vineyards and olive groves thrive in nearby towns. Marzadro handles the marketing for all products created under the agricola's umbrella. “I was born here, grew up around the distillery, and it was my playground when I wanted to take a break from studying,” he says. “Getting word out about our wines, spirits, olive oils, and restaurant is demanding, but my goal is



JANICE KWONG



ELYSE GLICKMAN

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP  
 LEFT Lake Como mansion; Taking in Lake Como's small town charm; The casual elegance of Pescheri del Garda; Ristorante Salice Blu interior; Bellagio street; Chef Luigi Gandola from Ristorante Salice Blu in Lake Como.



ELYSE GLICKMAN



SERVES 2

## Lake Trout with Strawberries & Cucumbers

*CHEF LUIGI* Gandola of Ristorante Salice Blu in Bellagio serves a delicate fish dish on a bed of *barba dei frati* lettuce, a local and highly seasonal ingredient. Baby spinach makes an acceptable substitute.

**Lake Trout**  
 2 fillets

**Extra Virgin Olive Oil**  
 30 ml

**Salt and Pepper**  
 to taste

**Fresh Lime**  
 2 slices

**Cucumber** 1

**Baby Spinach** 50 g

**Butter** 20 g

**Strawberries**  
 50 g, sliced

**Sicilian Lemon Juice**  
 50 g

**1 BRUSH** the trout fillets with a little of the olive oil, season with salt and pepper and a place the lime slices on top. Place for two hours in the fridge.

**2 IN** the meantime, peel the cucumber, remove the seeds, and waffle-cut a few slices with a mandoline.

**3 BLEND** the rest of the cucumber with the lemon juice and the rest of the olive oil. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

**4 BRIEFLY** wilt the spinach with the butter in a frying pan over medium heat.

**5 REMOVE** the fish from the fridge, place it on a baking tray, and put it in the oven for three minutes at 200°C, not fully cooking it.

**6 CREATE** a nest of spinach and place the fish on top.

**7 DRESS** with the cucumber sauce and the sliced strawberries.

to reach the public, particularly young people, about the preservation of our food and culture."

The sparkling white wine served with *involtino di almerino con le sue ova* (char fish roll topped with char caviar, broccoli, and tomato confit) is made from Nosiola, a rare varietal native to Trentino. The vineyards' higher latitude and specific temperature fluctuations and soils, meanwhile, yield a fresh, aromatic, and easy-to-drink wine that pairs beautifully with a risotto simmered with Trento DOC MDV, Trentino *luganega* sausage, artichokes and Trentingrana cheese; house rigatoni with a tomato and fish-»



SERVES 4

## Linguine with Walnuts & Parsley

**THE WOOD** of the Lombardy walnut, grown in the forested regions around Lake Como, was highly prized for furniture making in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Walnuts also feature in local cuisine, along with other regional ingredients like mushrooms, snails and chestnuts.

**Olive Oil**  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup

**Garlic** 4 cloves, peeled and chopped

**Linguine** 400 g

**Lemon Zest** from 1

**Walnuts** chopped,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup

**Flat Leaf Parsley** chopped, 1 cup

**Parmigiano Reggiano Cheese** freshly grated,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup

**Salt and Freshly Ground Black Pepper** to taste

**1 WARM** the oil in a large sauté pan over low heat. Add the garlic and cook gently for 3–4 minutes, until soft and fragrant but not browned. Stir in the chopped walnuts and lemon zest, season generously with black pepper, remove the pan from the heat and set aside.

**2 BRING** a large pot of salted water to the boil and add the linguine. Cook the pasta till *al dente*. Drain the pasta, reserving  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of the pasta water. Add the drained pasta, chopped parsley, Parmigiano and pasta water to the sauté pan, toss to combine. Season with salt, black pepper and an additional sprinkling of fresh Parmigiano.



ALL PHOTOS THIS SPREAD: ELYSE GLICKMAN

“Crostata al Limone del Lago di Garda,” a favourite lemon pastry said to be invented in the area in the late 70s.

Driving deeper into the Veneto the next day brings a heartier taste of this region's food history, steeped in pasta, rich meat-driven risotto dishes, and grilled meats. The first stop is Valeggio sul Mincio for lunch at Alla Borsa, which is impressively packed with Verona-area customers on a rainy day. Second-generation owner Nadia Pasquali expresses her pride in being a proud restaurateur in a “city of restaurants, but not the touristy ones,” operating in a historic building near a former stock exchange. “This is old school and we love it!” she affirms as she shows photos from a 2024 edition of a charity event drawing 3,500 tortellini lovers.

Alla Borsa has been producing tortellini pasta with a variety of fillings since 1959, but it is an art form that has been crafted by hand since the fifteenth century also bearing the nickname of “love knots,” according to Pasquali. It is also known as “silk scarf” pasta because of the almost-translucent skin covering the filling and closure with delicate folds. A team of dedicated women working out of Pasquali's kitchen continue the tradition, producing the 44 pounds of tortellini ordered daily.

Alla Borsa's menu adds to the story with a section of a dozen tortellini varieties with different fillings, sauces and finishes. We are served a three-course sampler that's perfect for a chilly and damp day, starting with pork and beef-filled “silk scarves” floating in an equally delicate chicken broth; a heartier bowl of pecorino and parmesan stuffed spinach-infused pasta in butter and sage, and a rich pasta filled with pumpkin with a velvety mouth feel.

Verona's architecture and waterways are reminiscent of Venice, but there are significantly fewer tourists around (with the exception of “Juliet's Balcony”), making it easier to navigate the streets and the Piazza delle Erbe market square and uncover the best restaurants off the tourist track. Trattoria Arco di Gavi, a half block past the arch serving as the boundary of the central business district, serves up the perfect supper for a transitional night going from winter to spring. It begins with a fresh apple, lettuce and walnut salad, continues with a filling beef risotto accented with a large slice of parmesan, and a main course where a server rolls out a cart of roasted poultry, pork and beef.»

«based sauce, or house tagliatelle with white beef sauce with MDV Nosola white wine and extra virgin olive oil.

We start that evening at Cantina F.lli Zeni winery to sample its sparkling wine, reds and whites before heading over to La Casa degli Spiriti, whose lake views and fanciful decor make it a constantly booked destination for wedding receptions and business meetings. While the reception buffet with fried appetizers, cheeses and charcuterie has a familiar feel to it, a thoughtfully-prepared meal that follows is a continuation of what we've been enjoying: Risotto with white asparagus, pan-fried prawns, and crustacean bisque; a sea bass fillet in beurre blanc, potato and spinach; and



## PHOTOS THIS SPREAD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT  
Verona; Trattoria  
Arco di Gavi dinner;  
Alla Borsa owner  
Nadia Pasquali; Wine  
tasting at Azienda  
Agricola Madonna  
delle Vittorie.



SERVES 6-8

## Vitello Tonnato

*VEAL IN* tuna sauce is a classic Piedmontese dish. It is served cold or at room temperature and is a perfect make-ahead dish for entertaining. If veal is hard to come by, pork loin makes an excellent substitute.

**Boneless Veal or Pork Loin Roast**  
1kg piece

**White Wine** 1 cup

**Celery** 1 stalk, chopped

**Bay Leaves** 2

**Onion** 1, chopped

**Garlic** 2 cloves, bruised

**Black Peppercorns**  
1 Tbs

**Lemon Slices**  
for garnish

**Fresh Herbs**  
for garnish

**Sauce**

**Egg Yolks** 2

**Extra Virgin Olive Oil** 200 ml

**Lemon Juice** 4 Tbs

**Tuna in Oil**  
1 x 185 g can

**Capers** 2 Tbs, roughly chopped

**Anchovy Fillets** 4, mashed to a paste

**Parsley** chopped, 2 Tbs

**Freshly Ground Black Pepper**  
to taste

**1** **PLACE** the meat in a Dutch oven with the wine and enough water to barely cover. Add the celery, bay leaves, onion, garlic and peppercorns. Bring to a boil then lower the heat to a simmer and cook, covered, until the meat reached an internal temperature of 140°F and is tender when pierced with a knife, about 90 minutes. Allow the meat to cool in its stock for about 45 minutes.

**2** **DRAIN** the tuna and place it in a mixing bowl, reserving the oil. Put the oil in a measuring jug and add olive oil to make a total 200 ml.

**3** **USE** a stick blender to combine the egg yolks, olive/tuna oil and lemon juice into a mayonnaise. (If making by hand, whisk the yolks and lemon juice, then drizzle the oil in very slowly, while whisking constantly).

**4** **ADD** the mayonnaise to the tuna and mash with a fork until the tuna is completely broken down. Add the capers, anchovies and parsley. Stir well to combine. Season with black pepper. Cover and chill in the fridge for 15-20 minutes.

**5** **REMOVE** the meat from the pot and pat dry with paper towel. Discard the stock or strain it and reserve for another use. Slice the meat thinly and place in overlapping layers on a large platter. Spoon the sauce over the meat. Garnish with lemon slices and fresh herbs if desired.

**6** **SERVE** immediately at room temperature or refrigerate for up to 24 hours and serve chilled.

# «Island Life, Northern Italian Style

TO CONCLUDE the nine-day road trip, we circle back into Lombardy through towns that sit along the banks of Lakes Garda and Maggiore. The perimeter of this lake dips into Piemonte and Brescia as do a number of islands accessible only by boat. They stand as self-contained mini-cities with private house museums, historic monuments, churches, parks, and high-end cafes that recall generations who lived on them a century or more ago. We also round back to dishes focused on regionally caught whitefish and lighter preparations.

After a short city tour around Salo, Brescia, we find shelter from heavy rains at Locanda del Benaco where we are served an amuse bouche of *salmerino* (trout) in candied lemon and a choice of *risotto con persico e agrumi* (risotto with lemon and perch) or *luccio in cunsa* (fried perch) *con olio e capperi del Garda*. Chef Gianni Briarava decides to serve us smaller portions of each. We transition to dessert, cardamom star anise sorbet, as Briarava discusses a conservation project he is involved with to help repopulate the lake with trout and other native fish.

Tiffany Restaurant, inside Relais Villa Porta, rolls out a multi-course "Slow Food Showcase." It makes perfect sense as nearby Piemonte is the birthplace of the Slow Food movement dedicated to sustainability, regional producers and continued recipe innovation. A starter course with silky gorgonzola gives way to a spring salad with edible flowers and lemon dressing, *Tartare Fassona Piemontese* (a local take on tuna tartare), Piemontese roast beef with brown jus and more of that crave inducing blue cheese, stuffed *tagliatella* (a giant, thick-skinned cousin to what we ate at La Borsa) with "Robiola di Roccaverano Slow Food Presidium" cheese, and braised veal cheek. The hotel's everyday breakfasts feature a choice of freshly baked pastries and some of the best espresso and cappuccino of the trip.

The road trip concludes in the Varesse region of Lombardy with jaunts by boat to Isola la Pescatore ("Fisherman's Island") and La Isola Bella ("Beautiful Island") in Lake Maggiore to visit gardens, churches and museums created the Borromeo family, followed by risotto and lake fish at Ristorante Delfino and sublime gelato at Gelateria L'Imbarcadero in the port town of Stresa.

Chef Michele Loffredo presides over our last supper at Lion D'Oro, inside the evocative early twentieth century Camin Hotel Luino. He has crafted the perfect four-course send-off, including hearty *Vembresca di tonno rosso del Mediterraneo* (rolled tuna with olives and other vegetables), *Spaghettoni Gragnano* (a thicker cousin of spaghetti) with three types of heirloom tomatoes, a beef filet with a port wine reduction and Cardoncelli mushrooms, and a pear William and chocolate ricotta tart with a pear-infused ricotta and melted chocolate.

Aboard the New York City-bound NEOS flight, my seatmate asked me, "What was your favourite meal?" His life experience as a native of Southern Italy and former executive at Alitalia made it particularly challenging to give him an answer. "You'll have to go back there for seconds," he said after my long pause. 



**PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE**  
**FROM TOP LEFT** Heavy rains in Salo city, Brescia; Chef Michele Loffredo from Lion D'oro; The port at Lake Maggiore; Chef Gianni Briarava and the owner of Locanda del Benaco restaurant, Salo; Isola Bella risotto with lake fish, from Ristorante Delfino, Lake Maggiore.



ALL PHOTOS THIS SPREAD ELYSE GLICKMAN



FOR MORE INFORMATION about travel to Italy, visit the [Italian National Tourist Board \(italia.it\)](http://italia.it) for details on points of interest and upcoming events throughout the country.

### Brescia

**Locanda del Benaco**

[www.locandadelbenaco.com/](http://www.locandadelbenaco.com/)

### Lombardy

**Alla Borsa**

[www.ristoranteborsa.it](http://www.ristoranteborsa.it)

**Azienda Agricola Madonna delle Vittorie**

[www.madonnadellevittorie.it](http://www.madonnadellevittorie.it)

**Bottega Comacini**

[www.bottegacomacini.it](http://www.bottegacomacini.it)

**Cantina F.lli Zeni**

[www.zeni.it/en](http://www.zeni.it/en)

**Gelateria L'Imbarcadero**

[www.gelateriaimbarcadero.com](http://www.gelateriaimbarcadero.com)

**La Casa degli Spiriti**

[www.casadeglispiriti.it](http://www.casadeglispiriti.it)

**Lake Como Tourism Office**

[www.lakecomotourism.it](http://www.lakecomotourism.it)

**Lion D'Oro**

[www.caminhotelluino.com/en/restaurant/](http://www.caminhotelluino.com/en/restaurant/)

**Ristorante Crotto dei Platani**

[www.crottodeiplatani.it](http://www.crottodeiplatani.it)

**Ristorante Delfino**

[www.terreborromeo.it/en/experience/delfino-restaurant](http://www.terreborromeo.it/en/experience/delfino-restaurant)

**Ristorante Salice Blu**

[www.ristorante-salicelblu-bellagio.it/en/](http://www.ristorante-salicelblu-bellagio.it/en/)

**Trattoria Arco di Gavi**

[www.trattoriaarcodeigavi.it/](http://www.trattoriaarcodeigavi.it/)



**Garda Bike Hotel**

[www.gardabikehotel.co/en](http://www.gardabikehotel.co/en)

**Hilton Lake Como**

[hilton.com/en/hotels/mxpcohi-hilton-lake-como](http://hilton.com/en/hotels/mxpcohi-hilton-lake-como)  
[www.terrazza241.it/](http://www.terrazza241.it/)

**Relais Villa Porta**

[www.villaporta.style/en](http://www.villaporta.style/en)

ELYSE GLICKMAN is a freelance writer and regular contributor to TASTE&TRAVEL based in Los Angeles.