

South China Morning Post 南華早報

Healthy Gourmet: Mauro's sardines on toast

Lifestyle › Health HEALTHY GOURMET

Andrea Oschetti healthpost@scmp.com

French poet Charles Baudelaire liked to walk by Honfleur harbour in France. What he saw there inspired him. He noted in his diary: "Those large and beautiful ships, invisibly balanced on tranquil waters, those hardy ships that look dreamy and idle, don't they seem to whisper to us in silent tongues: 'When shall we set sail for happiness?' "

Today, if travels are to be a way to act out our dreams, my advice is that you get off the beaten track. Put away the guide books and do away with tour guides. Enter the world of bespoke travel, tailored to your interests, not for the masses.

Travelling has become more of a spectator's sport than an exciting voyage of discovery. Tourists are stripped of experiences and presented with an orgy of landmarks: a Gothic cathedral, a Renaissance painting, a post-modern bridge, a glimpse of a sunset and a dinner at a busy restaurant, all in one day.

I am passionate about cooking and I make my travels meaningful with it: not as a spectator, but by immersing myself in food experiences and connecting with people who open new culinary landscapes for me.

This is bespoke travel. It changes travel from ticking boxes to life-enhancing opportunities.

Simone Sturla is my travel guru (simone.sturla@italybao.com). [1] He has been tailoring travel experiences for his clients for more than 20 years, and can arrange a private visit to the Sistine Chapel, a dinner in the home of a celebrity chef, a night at the Palladian Villa of a local duke, or a private tour round a Formula One circuit with a professional driver.

On a recent trip, I wanted to experience Italian food. It's not just about what you eat at restaurants, it's a culture with rich culinary traditions rooted in local people and their territory.

Its authenticity is to be found in a private setting - a home, a boat, a picnic in the vineyards - where your host passionately tells the exciting stories behind what you eat.

Sturla took me on a short journey to discover two of what he calls "Italian food excellences".

In Venice, he exposed me to a different way of travelling: sailing on Eolo, one of the few remaining flat-bottomed *bragozzo* boats that allow you to escape the usual canals and get to know Venice and its lagoon from a new perspective.

Mauro is Eolo's captain and the chef who took us on an overnight sailing trip to celebrate the full moon that covers the lagoon "with a silver kiss". He took us to the local market to buy the

food for dinner.

The boat starts sailing towards the treasures of the lagoon. Mauro gets busy in the kitchen. Everything he is cooking for us is rooted in the lagoon: the ingredients, the recipes and Mauro's cooking skills, learned from his mum and grandmother.

We open a bottle of wine and he invites us to help him in the kitchen. The dishes he is preparing are not just local, but linked to our sailing experience. The rice is made richer with the black ink of squid, which were caught en route.

The sardines are marinated in vinegar and onions, which preserve them for a long journey at sea. The lagoon's crabs are served with the local radicchio, a chicory with the distinctive white-veined red leaf that's mildly bitter and has been known since antiquity.

The full moon finally rises. We are sitting around the table in the Eolo's stern, travelling around Venice, eating local delicacies and sipping wine, listening to Mauro's storytelling. I feel in harmony with the local environment: I am living in Venice, not watching a touristic rendition of it.

From Venice, we travel south. Near Orvieto, we turn on to an unpaved road, lined with trees, which climbs up over the mountain near the medieval town of Monteleone, perched on a hill.

We arrive at an isolated cottage, which in the 19th century was the resting place for travellers on a pilgrimage to Rome. The air is clean, the silence broken only by the singing of crickets.

A local family is waiting for us, and they are all busy cooking. Francesca is rolling the pasta, her daughter Anna is stirring the sauce, her son Stefano is preparing the lamb, and the father Antonio opening the wine.

Italians are at their best at home - even our global fashion businesses are family-run. In this cottage, all is home-made: preserved vegetables, jams, cheeses, hams and wine. The vegetables come from the garden and the meat from a neighbour.

Home cooking is a must for any gourmet travelling to Italy. The three-star restaurants are not enough to experience Italian cuisine. You need to find a way to be welcomed into a local home.

For the next four hours, we sit in the big open kitchen beside the marble fireplace. The rustic taste of home food brings back memories of my childhood, lulled by the chatting of Antonio, and Francesca's invitation to eat and drink more.

They are proud of their food and, once again, we have all found happiness together.

Mauro's appetiser of sardines

Serves 4

9 fresh sardines

Vinegar

Extra virgin olive oil

A bunch of parsley

A clove of garlic

Some breadcrumbs

One country loaf of bread, sliced

- Clean the sardines and pass the fillets through a bath of vinegar. Then let them rest in olive oil.
- Finely chop the garlic clove and the parsley and add them to the breadcrumbs with some more olive oil.
- Coat the sardines in the breadcrumb mixture. Fry them on medium heat for about two minutes each
- When ready to serve, lay each sardine fillet on a small slice of grilled or toasted bread. Top with parsley sauce.

Healthy Gourmet is a weekly series by private chef Andrea Oschetti, andrea@fioreblu.com [2]

Topics: Fish

Clupeidae

Economy of Cornwall

Source URL (retrieved on Oct 2nd 2012, 1:53pm):

<http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/health/article/1051629/healthy-gourmet-mauros-sardines-toast>

Links:

[1] [mailto:\(simone.sturla@italybao.com\)](mailto:simone.sturla@italybao.com).

[2] <mailto:andrea@fioreblu.com>