

HESP OUT WEST

Technology serves up an authentic Italian feast experience

Martin Hesp samples traditional salumi with an expert from the comfort of his own home

Hesp Out West is based on something I call the Campaign for Real Experiences, or CARE – vaguely inspired by CAMRA, the Campaign for Real Ale. People are increasingly finding themselves living in a virtual world – we spend far too much time on our screens and we rely on digital technology for almost everything. There’s even news of a device which will allow you to taste or smell something you see on your screen, like a steak sizzling in a pan. Whatever next? Soon we won’t need to leave our sofa.

So I believe that CARE is going to become a thing. As the robots take over, we humans will look more and more to simple “real-life” things we can do in order to enjoy, or take part in, authentic experiences – like taking fabulous coastal walks such as the one we enjoyed last week at Zennor.



> Hog's pudding, black pudding, local sausages and bacon

Having said all that, there is always a middle way. Nothing is just black or white. I’m talking about when new technology is used to bring you an authentic experience, and here’s an example of what I mean... As a Guild of Food Writers member I was recently invited to join a webinar focusing on Italy’s traditional cured and cooked pork products, collectively known as salumi. Being a greedy blighter, I was attracted to the idea because the organisers promised to send out a box of samples.

I duly joined the three webinars on my iPad and ended up enjoying the talks by a delightful man called Augusto Cosimi, from the Consorzio Italiano tutela Mortadella Bologna, just as much as I did sampling the savoury morsels. Here was one of the world’s leading experts on one of the world’s most delicious forms of meat-based food, talking to me directly along with 20 or so others



> A classic Italian deli in Lucca

dotted around the globe. I was able to ask questions as well as taste the sublime porcine offerings. What could be better?

Most foodies will agree that a good Italian delicatessen represents something of a high altar. We have some good examples here in the UK, but if you really want to see a living shrine which reflects one nation’s love for food, then you have to visit one of these mouth-watering treasure-chests in the Land of Salumi. Many’s the time when I’ve strolled into such an emporium and just stood there for ten minutes staring in wonder.

There’ll be all manner of cured meats, like Parma ham and a range of salamis and mortadella. There will be mountains of cheeses (formaggi), Parmigiano Reggiano DOP or Pecorino Romano DOP or gorgonzola, alongside heaps of bread and baked goods such focaccia, taralli Pugliesi and grissini Torinesi. Colour will be added by great bowls of olives and preserved specialties, such as sott’olio vegetables (artichokes, mushrooms, and peppers preserved in olive oil) and sun-dried tomatoes. Above them you’ll see shelves groaning with tinned and jarred delicacies, such as tonno in olio d’oliva and bottarga di muggine (salted, dried, and pressed mullet roe). And, always, there be a vast range of different pasta shapes and rice.

I not only feel hungry just

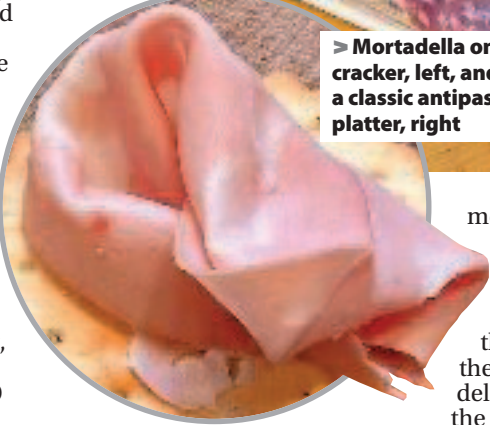
writing that paragraph, I also wonder (as I’ve so often done before) why every town in the UK doesn’t have a specialist food shop dedicated solely to the fine delicacies and morsels produced in this country? Yes, we have a scattering of famous delights (stilton, Melton Mowbray pork pie, Cornish pasties, Craster kippers, to name but a few), but where are the Augusto Cosimis of this world talking-up regional wonders, like the absolutely delicious Cornish hog’s pudding I bought in St Just last week?

I mention this because a couple of the Italian products Augusto talked about in the webinars were not a million miles from a hog’s pudding.

The webinars were based on something called the UAB 6 project, designed to promote PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) and PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) products, specifically Italian cured meats and wines. Augusto explained the significance of these designations (which ensure authenticity and traditional



> Mortadella on a cracker, left, and a classic antipasto platter, right



methods of manufacture) before describing the history of the various delicacies and the basic way in

which artisan butchers make them.

Mortadella
Let’s start with the mortadella, that weird, pink, fat, sausagey thing, speckled with flecks of pork fat,

emulsified pork. Some versions incorporate pistachios or black peppercorns, lending further depth to its mild, aromatic flavour.

Okay, so mortadella has been given a bumpy ride – mainly thanks to the fact that outside Italy industrially made versions have done a lot to tarnish its reputation. Inside the country, however – and in Bologna in particular – it remains a revered delicacy, best enjoyed in paper-thin slices with fresh baked bread or dry crackers which showcase its luxurious texture.

As in all these products, look out for the all-important red and yellow (PDO) or the blue and yellow (PGI) labels, which guarantee authentic quality. They’re not hard to find here in the UK – I saw packs of authentic PDO mortadella on sale in a well-known German supermarket in my local town last week.

Zampone and cotechino Modena
Far more difficult to find (in this country at least) are zampone and cotechino Modena. I had seen them before, hanging like mysterious dismembered appendages in Italian delis, but I had no idea what they were or what you’d do to prepare them at home, until Augusto told me. Both are variations on a similar theme – seasoned, finely minced pork encased in natural skin – but each carries a distinct historical and cultural significance.

Zampone, a dish born of necessity during the siege of Mirandola in the early 16th century, is basically a deboned pig’s trotter filled with a pork meat stuffing (the legend talks about locals hiding their best meat in a tired looking trotter).

Cotechino is more or less the same thing, only it is covered in a more conventional sausage casing. Both contain a similar blend of seasoned pork, fat, and various collagen-rich cuts which give these delicacies their almost gelatinous mouth-feel. Not for everyone, I know, but I loved them.

Like mortadella, both are cooked before eating – traditionally simmered for hours to achieve their gelatinous texture. Nowadays most examples come pre-cooked, you just heat them in a pan of hot water for 20 minutes before serving. In Italy, the two products are massively popular at New Year, when they are served with lentils, symbolising prosperity for the year ahead.

Apart from their rich and savoury flavour, zampone and cotechino Modena showcase an important part of the Italian approach to butchery – they call it “niente si butta via” – or, “nothing goes to waste”. A nose-to-tail philosophy which was around long before sustainability movements became trendy... The art of transforming otherwise overlooked cuts into products of gastronomic value.

NEXT WEEK: MARTIN IS INVITED TO THE DANISH AMBASSADOR’S RESIDENCE IN LONDON TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT SUSTAINABLE FOOD IN THE FUTURE



> Salamini Italiani alla Cacciatora DOP is named after the staple for hunters who’d carry these small sausages as a source of protein

Salamini Italiani alla Cacciatora DOP

A traditional Italian cured sausage, known for its compact size, delicate flavour, and historical significance.

Cacciatora means ‘hunter’s style’ – so this salami is named after the staple for hunters (alongside hog’s pudding, black pudding, and a host of other traditional British meat products) score highly when it comes to sustainability, because they help utilise every ounce of an animal that has been bred and slaughtered for human consumption.

This delicious salami is made across central and northern Italy, using finely ground pork, a salt and black pepper seasoning and plenty of a garlic. The sausages are then slowly aged to develop their mild, but savoury, flavour. Salamini Italiani alla Cacciatora enjoys a big reputation in its home country, and is often served as part

of an antipasto platter alongside cheeses, olives, and rustic bread.

And what could be better than a large antipasto platter? If I were ever to go vegetarian for sustainability reasons, it would be one of the meaty treats I missed the most.

But then, you could argue that all three salumi described above (alongside hog’s pudding, black pudding, and a host of other traditional British meat products) score highly when it comes to sustainability, because they help utilise every ounce of an animal that has been bred and slaughtered for human consumption.

And I am able to say all this thanks to a truly authentic experience, which I enjoyed with the help of my iPad screen.



> Salamini Italiani alla Cacciatora DOP