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# TASTE:

A GRAND TOUR OF ITALY'S BEST FOODS AND WINES

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In mid-March my husband and I were among the over 10,000 visitors that streamed into the *stazione leopolda*, once Florence's most important railroad station near Le Cascine, the city's splendid park, to attend the 5th edition of TASTE, a unique and not-to-be missed eno-gastronomic happening with only top champion players. Our number was a 25% increase in attendance over last year's 8,000 visitors.

TASTE is different from Italy's many food *sagre* or local festivals which promote local products as well as from the enormous national promotional fairs like the *Salone del Gusto* in Turin, *Cibus* in Parma, and *Vinitaly* in Verona. It was founded and is still organized by *Pitti Immagine*, which also sets up all the fashion shows held annually at Florence's Pitti Palace. *Pitti Immagine's* philosophy behind TASTE is similar to its approach towards fashion: to discover and promote top-quality producers and their niche products. "Just as Italy overtook French fashion and is now tops worldwide," Raffaello Napoleone, CEO of *Pitti Immagine*, told me, "the same goal should be sought by the best food and wine producers. It's a question of quality not quantity."



At the *stazione leopolda* TASTE 2010 had five sections. The exhibitors in TASTE TOUR were from all of Italy's 20 regions and were chosen only after a very severe selection process by a panel of experts. They represent only the *crème-de-la-crème* of Italy's eno-gastronomy. Their food products on display in the several aisles of the TASTE TOUR section and offered for tastings by this year's over 200 exhibitors included wines, spumante, and prosecco, olives and olive oil, balsamic vinegar, beer, digestives, mineral waters, prosciutto, salami and many other pork products, truffles and dried mushrooms, bread, rice and pasta, pasta sauces, lentils, chocolate, biscuits, *confetti*, coffee, *panforte*, ice cream, tuna fish, smoked fish, *bottarga*, cheese, capers from both Sardinia and the Aeolian Islands off Sicily, pistachios from Bronte in Sicily, sun-dried tomatoes, many kinds of preserves, jams, and honey.

Some exhibitors seemed to be arranged by food type; others by region of provenance. To name just a few I talked with: *Barbero Cioccolato*, *Birra Baladin*, *Azienda Agricola*

*Czarnocki Lucheschi*, *Pane di Matera I.G.P.*, *DA RE Spa*, *Bibanesi*, *Distilleria Varnelli*, *Donnafugata*, *Giordano 1938*, *Giraudi*, *Luigi Guffanti Fiori Formaggi 1976*, *Pastai Gragnanesi Soc. Coop.*, *Pastificio Benedetto Cavalieri dal 1918*, *Pastificio Caponi dal 1953*, *Prosciuttificio Dok Dall'Ava*, *S. Ilario Prosciutti*, *Acquerello*, *Scyavuru*, *Stefano Rocca*, *Torrefazione Caffè Lelli*, *Torta Barozzi Pasticceria Gollini*, *Torta Pistocchi*, *Ursini*, *Schooner*, *Edible Gold*, *Consorzio Parco Produce*, *In.Gredienti*, *Vestri*, and *Paul De Bondt*, the Dutch chocolatier who lives in Pisa with his Italian wife.

The *stazione leopolda* is a dreary example of industrial archeology. It is hard to believe that anyone could successfully spruce up its crumbling walls. Compliments definitely should go to architect Alessandro Moradei for its overall imaginative "look". Mario Luca Giusti's noteworthy chandeliers made of glasses and pitchers and artist Roberto Bertazzon's limited edition of 180 "*pièdipiatti*", large plates which look like fried eggs in different color schemes, and produced by Murano's most famous hand-blown glass company, Venini, were as tantalizing as the food products. They were wasted as décor for the bar/restaurant with its unimaginative menu which sadly was the only unappealing area of TASTE 2010.

Besides the general public and tourists, the crowd included 1,120 buyers (an increase of 6.5% over last year) from Italy of course, The Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Russia, Hong Kong, and Canada. It was not possible to buy directly from the exhibitor at his *bancone* or counter, but TASTE SHOP, organized a bit like a supermarket, offered over 1,300 of the exhibitors' various products and sold over 20,000 items during TASTE's three days. Venini's "*Piedipiatti*" are still for sale at Venini outlets at Fondamenta Vetrai 50 on Murano; San Marco 314, Piazzetta Leoncini in Venice; and at Venini, Via Monte Napoleone 9 in Milan, for 250 euros.

In addition to food products the sectors TASTE TOOLS displayed kitchen equipment, table settings, and clothing for chefs available for purchase at TASTE SHOP or by direct ordering while TASTE PRESS offered for sale in situ books and magazines dedicated to eno-gastronomic subjects.

Very importantly TASTE RING hosted a series of talk shows and encounters with experts in the field. Some of the topics debated here: "What factors make a top-quality food product? Some people believe it's the place-of-origin; others say it's the ingredients; and still others the manufacturing techniques;" "Will the ever-decreasing disappearance of small family-run, Mom-and-Pop shops also lead to the disappearance of small niche food producers?" The general consensus here was yes, because the small producer cannot produce enough to fill the demand of a supermarket chain or of an international distributor. This probably accounts also for the very small number of American buyers in attendance. The last but not less serious topic was "Should additives be banned?" There has been a lot of debate in the press over the last year about whether Italy should ban foods prepared with additives and nitrites from being served in

restaurants because they are believed harmful to health. The government's newly-issued guidelines on this subject are not clear.

Aside from the events in the *stazione leopolda*, **TASTE 2010** organized events at restaurants, hotels delicatessens, artisan shops and concept stores throughout Florence called **FuoriDiTaste**. All one hundred or so well indicated with their times on a map of Florence provided at **TASTE**'s ticket counter, they included highly-specialized tasting menus at several well-known restaurants (that I can highly recommend at all times during any Florentine sojourn) at reasonable prices: codfish and sardines at Olio & Convivium (Via Santo Spirito 4, 011-39-055-2658198, [www.conviviumfirenze.it](http://www.conviviumfirenze.it)), which also offers regular cooking courses and products; dishes with wild herbs and terrace-grown vegetables at enthralling Teatro del Sale with its own emporium of homemade products and almost daily cabaret (Via dei Macci 111r, 011-39-055-2001492, [www.edizioniteatrodelsalecibreoifirenze.it](http://www.edizioniteatrodelsalecibreoifirenze.it)) owned by amiable Fabio Picchi, also the owner of super-starred restaurant Cibréo (Via del Verrocchio 8r, 011-39-0552341100, e-mail: [cibreo.fi@tini.it](mailto:cibreo.fi@tini.it)); innards at Giovanna Iorio's Alle Murate (Via del Proconsolo 16r, 011-39-055240618, [www.allemurate.it](http://www.allemurate.it)); *pomodori del piennolo* (the tiny tomato from Vesuvius near Naples) at Pizzeria'O Munaciello (Via Maffia 31r, 011-39-055-287198, [www.munaciello.it](http://www.munaciello.it)); and an unedited menu by the young chef Stefano Santo at the Onice Lounge of Villa La Vedetta (Villa Michelangelo 78, 011-39-055-681631, [www.villalavedettahotel.it](http://www.villalavedettahotel.it)), just for a few examples; all required reservations. Not to mention other **FuoriDiTaste 2010** events: lessons in butchery, in bartending from Fulvio Pierangelini, former owner of the 3-Michelin-starred restaurant Gambero Rosso in San Vincenzo and now food consultant to Rome's deluxe hotel La Russie, in beer production and much more.



*Arrivederci a TASTE 6* which will take place from 12-14 March, 2011. *Stazione Leopolda* is located at Viale Fratelli Rosselli 5. 2010 Hours were 10:30-20:30 on Saturday and Sunday and 9:30-16:30 on Monday, when it was open only to professionals in the eno-gastronomic field. This year, among Monday's visitors were several top chefs: Fulvio Pierangelini, Raffaele and Massimiliano Alajmo, Fabio Picchi, and Marco Stabile, on the look-out for new products to introduce in their kitchens. Entrance fee: 10 euros in 2010. For more information and updates for TASTE 6 consult [www.tastefirenze.it](http://www.tastefirenze.it) and [www.fuoriditaste.com](http://www.fuoriditaste.com).

If, after a visit to **TASTE** and **FuoriDiTaste**, you still have an appetite for more foodie tourism, be sure to head for Florence's two-floored glass and cast-iron *Mercato Centrale* off Via dell'Ariento, in the city's San Lorenzo district. At this, Europe's largest indoor food market, you can see where the inhabitants of this magnificent Renaissance city have bought their food on a daily basis since 1874. Don't miss the take-away stalls selling *porchetta* (roast suckling pig), *lampredotto* (pig's intestines), and trippa (tripe).

Then after a foot-weary day, I recommend that you have a good night's sleep at the reasonably-priced Hotel Rosso 23 (011-39-55-277300, [info@hotelrosso23.com](mailto:info@hotelrosso23.com)) on the Piazza Santa Maria Novella with rooms overlooking its splendid green-and-white marble Dominican church, the favorite of 19th-century British art historian/critic John Ruskin and home to Masaccio's Trinity (1425-7) and works-of-art by other Renaissance geniuses including Botticelli, Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Ghirlandaio, Uccello, and Vasari. In this year of celebrations worldwide for the 400th anniversary of Galileo Galilei's declaration that the sun was the center of the universe, it may be of interest that it was from the pulpit here that thundered down the first attack on the astronomer's "heretical" viewpoint, eventually leading to his indictment.

Next door to the church at Via della Scala 16 is one of the oldest pharmacies in the world established by the Dominicans in 1221 and functioning ever since. Opened to the public in 1612, today it sells marvelous soaps and perfumes.

You'll be in excellent company on this piazza. Henry James lived in an apartment here at no. 10, while he was writing *Roderick Hudson* and Ralph Waldo Emerson, J.D. Howells, and Longfellow all stayed at the Hotel Minerva, still in existence and across from my windows at Hotel Rosso 23.



Piazza Santa Maria Novella



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