

Happy 100th Birthday “TRAMEZZINO”

by Lucy Gordan | Food, Food blog | 0 comments



A tramezzino at Caffè Mulassano Courtesy of Caffè Mulassano

The “tramezzino”, the Italian version of the British tea sandwich, is celebrating its 100th birthday this year. Although first served in Turin, it owes its creation to Detroit.

In 1919, with her parents’ blessing, 15-year-old Angela Demichelis left Turin and crossed the Atlantic by herself on a steamer arriving in Detroit to become the child-bride of 30-year-old fellow-torinese Onorino Nebiolo. With his brothers and their families, he owned several restaurants and night-clubs.

The couple soon had two children, Felice, named for his paternal grandfather, and Gloria for the in-vogue actress Gloria Swanson, but motherhood didn’t stop the ever-enterprising Angela from becoming one of the first women in the United States to obtain a driver’s license. Ambitious and stubborn she did so to help the families’ businesses, her responsibility being to drive alone to Canada to buy contraband liquor during the beginning of Prohibition. Not surprisingly, although the law didn’t, the local Italian-American mafia soon discovered her escapades. When it threatened to kidnap Felice if she didn’t stop her illegal drives, the

young family decided to return to Turin bringing with them a newly-invented pop-up toaster.



Mole Antonelliana

Safely home again, in 1925 the couple decided to invest their savings by buying for 300,000 lire just for the license the small (only 31 Square meters), but fashionable wood-paneled Caffè Mulassano, decorated with mirrors so as to seem bigger as well as with numerous artifacts and still in existence today, at Piazza Castello 15. (In the mid-1800s the Mulassano family had opened a wine shop at Via Nizza 3, known as the Distilleria Sacco, where they produced a famous mint syrup. In 1907 they moved to the Caffè's present location and transformed the wine shop into a Caffè). The Nebiolos wanted to modernize the Caffè and increase business so they introduced the American staple "toast".

However, when it wasn't a success, because the bread consumed in Italy at the time (and still today: large, crusted loaves) wasn't appropriate for "toasts", they switched to making small sandwiches using the soft white bread (pancarré) they'd become accustomed to in Detroit but first cutting away the crust and never heating the bread.



Entrance of the Caffè Mulassano Courtesy of the Caffè Miulassano

Not unlike the British tea sandwich designed to be consumed in a couple of mouthfuls so not

to get your fingers dirty, the Nebiolos served them to accompany not tea but a morning coffee or the afternoon aperitif of Vermouth and soon tramezzini were the rage, but no longer called “sandwich”. Ever since there has been a plaque on the Caffè’s wall reporting: “In 1926 Mrs. Angela Demichelis Nebiolo invented the “tramezzino” here.”

A new commemoration created recently is the “tramezzino” named “Angela” by the famous Piemontese chef Paolo Griffa, owner of the Caffè Nazionale di Aosta. Made with whole wheat bread, its fillings are juniper smoked salmon trout with gold flakes, chives, mayonnaise, crispy salad, and roasted sunflower seeds.



Paolo Griffa

Instead, the term “tramezzino” was the brainchild of Gabriele D’Annunzio, the revered poet but also famous for his heroic pro-Fascist activities and his refined palate. Although he lived at his villa on Lake Garda, the “Vittoriale”, now a museum full of Fascist memorabilia and the Vate’s (a title previously reserved exclusively for Dante Alighieri) enormous art collection, he made frequent visits to Turin, the birthplace and production center of his great love, cinema, so he often stopped at the Caffè Mulassano.

During Fascism words in foreign languages were considered unpatriotic. In fact, in 1923 the Fascist Party drew up a rule forbidding the use of foreign terms, so devout party-member D’Annunzio substituted sandwich with “tramezzino”. His choice originated from the word, tramezzo, meaning “something in between”: referring 1) to the wooden wall or partition dividing living space into rooms like at his birthplace in Pescara in the Abruzzi, or 2) more likely either a small snack between meals or 3) the filling between the two square-shaped slices of pancarré cut diagonally into triangles.



Gabriele D'Annunzio

Whatever his inspiration, the website of the Accademia dei georgofili, founded in Florence in 1753 as the first association for agricultural studies, www.georgofili.info tells us it is a well-known fact that D'Annunzio was well paid for coming up with this new name because he invented or “Italianized” the names of many other new Italian food products and business: the liquors Amaretto di Saronno and Amaro Montenegro, the biscuit company Saiwa and the store chain Rinascente.

In the following years the popularity of the “tramezzino” spread to other caffès in Turin and gradually to other Italian cities. Its strength lay in its simplicity: it was easy to prepare (at first filled with butter and anchovies, now the Caffè Mulassano’s menu proposes 30 different made-to-order fillings, many with typically Piemontese ingredients like bagna cauda or vitello tonnato, for examples), convenient to eat, and slowly allowed for endless combinations of fillings with new ones still being created today, even by three-star Michelin chefs like Matteo Baronetto, from 2014-25 at Turin’s Del Cambio, Cavour’s favorite

restaurant where a table is still set for him daily.



Matteo Baronetto

A crucial role in its growing popularity was also played by the magazine *La Cucina Italiana*, which in a long article published several of the “tramezzino”’s early recipes in 1936 as well as how to create them. Since then, the “tramezzino” has become a permanent fixture of Italian daily life served as a quick lunch, at buffets and family celebrations. I took Guida Torino’s advice: in addition to Caffè Mulassano (most special fillings: lobster; truffles; bagna cauda); for Turin’s best head to Tramezzino Torino, Via Fratelli Calandra 18/20, for mortadella, black truffles, and basil; gorgonzola, celery and apple; Norwegian smoked salmon, cream cheese and dill; Trivè Time, Via Giovanni Amendola 21/B for bresaola and lime; truffles; shrimp and hazel nuts; mortadella, figs and Piemontese meat; Bar Zucca, Via Antonio Gramsci 10, truffle cream and shrimps; and Caffè Platti, Corso Vittorio Emanuele II 72, anchovies and peperoni; vitello tonnato, sausage from Bra; and mascarpone and anchovies.



Cover of Salvatore Tripodi biography of Angela

If you speak Italian and want to know more about the history of the Caffè Mulassano, Turin's "tramezzini" and Angela Demichelis Nebiolo, order her biography *La signora del Mulassano* by Salvatore Tripodi from Amazon. For example, here you'll learn that in 1938 Angela and Onorino stopped making "tramezzini", sold the Caffè Mulassano and, probably on D'Annunzio's advice, bought five movie theaters.



Portrait of Giacomo Casanova by his brother

Addenda: Venice also claims to have invented the "tramezzino", nicknamed tramesin in Venetian dialect, but we don't know when, even if possibly before or soon after Turin. What we do know is that what is considered the oldest bacaro (tavern) Cantina Do Mori near the Rialto Bridge, founded in c. 1462, served small but square open



Cantina Do Mori Courtesy of the Cantina

face sandwiches with crust still called cicchetti (something small) similar to Spanish tapas, but not when the tavern introduced tramesin, nicknamed gobba (humpbacks) or bombata (bulging) because the fillings are placed at the center of soft white bread's two slices giving them a rounded top.

Like in Turin many of the fillings are local products: radicchio and gorgonzola; cod fish; sardines, herring and crab. The Cantina Do Mori meaning two dark-skinned people), Sestiere San Polo 429, gets its name after its first owners or servers. It was a favorite haunt of Giacomo Cassanova for his love trysts especially since it had and still has two entrances. For the other addresses for Venice's best, several websites agree on Alla Toletta, Dorsoduro 1911, with over 50 fillings to choose from; Bar Rialto (Da Lollo), Ruga dei Spezieri 234, for its prosciutto and green apple; Bar Tiziano Salizada, S. Giovanni Grisostomo 5747, Bar Filovia, Fondamenta Santa Chiara 521, and Motondosa, all near the railroad station Santa Lucia for their seafood selections.



Gobbas

City

FIND HOTELS