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Italy's Spring Fling With Asparagus

Debut dishes, hot rivalries and festivals spark the white variety's season near Venice

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By J. S. MARCUS

Bassano del Grappa, Italy



Vicenza è

Bassano del Grappa and its bridge designed by Andrea Palladio.

It's March, and Bassano del Grappa is shaking off an unusually long winter. This northern Italian town of 42,000 is known for the fragrant liquor that's part of its name, its nearby thriving businesses (Diesel Jeans, for one) and a 16th-century wooden bridge, designed by Andrea Palladio.

But right now, it's all about asparagus.

A couple of weeks ago, restaurateur Franco Scmazzon invited some guests to sample the season's very first cut white asparagus. At a lunch in his fish restaurant Locanda CasaNova in nearby Cassola, the Bassano native was testing some of the asparagus creations he'll show off at a multi-restaurant celebration on April 8. The standout dish: sea bass carpaccio with delicate slivers of raw asparagus.

In April and May, Bassano will go asparagus crazy. Visitors from across Italy come to sample its sweet white variety, grown entirely underground by around 100 local farmers. (It would start to turn green if any sunlight touched it.) At a range of festivals, aficionados feast on the stalks, which are best eaten a few hours out of the ground, while chefs from Bassano to Venice, an hour's drive southeast, showcase their most imaginative asparagus dishes.

"The epitome of seasonal food" is what Lidia Bastianich, the New York restaurateur and Italian cookbook author, calls Bassano's white asparagus. "It's firm but not fibrous" like other white asparagus, says Ms. Bastianich, who comes from northeast Italy and knows the Bassano area well. Bassano asparagus has a unique range of tastes, she says, creating a "dissonance between the initial sweetness and the bitterness at the end." She eats it with pasta, polenta or eggs—or just warmed in a skillet with butter and some cheese. At the peak of the season in mid-May, one of her meals may include three or four asparagus courses.

Trip Planner

This weekend local asparagus starts to flood Bassano-area restaurants—20 of which will

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Getting There

Bassano del Grappa, about 36 miles from Venice, is easily reachable by public transportation from that city and such nearby cities as Vicenza, Padua and Treviso. Renting a car, though, is recommended. For asparagus-related events, www.vicenzae.org, tel: +39-0444-99-4770

Where to Stay

Villa Brocchi Colonna, about a mile out of town, is a small estate with fine views in the foothills of the Alps, with a recently converted wing to the main 17th-century house serving as a hotel. The estate's farm provides olive oil and wine. Double rooms, including breakfast, average €120 a night. www.villabrocchicolonna.it Tel: +39-0424-501580

The **Hotel Villa Cipriani**, owned by the firm that manages the lavish Hotel Excelsior on Venice's Lido beach, is in Asolo, about nine miles east of Bassano del Grappa. Housed in a 16th-century villa, this is considered one of the Veneto region's most luxurious country hotels. Standard spring rates for a double with breakfast start at around €375. (Discounts may apply.) www.villaciprianiasolo.com Tel: +39-0423-52-3411

If you stay in Venice and make a day trip to Bassano, a new place to stay is the 50-room **Centurion Palace Hotel**, in an early-19th-century palazzo on the Grand Canal. Traces of premodern luxury are complemented by post-modern decorative flourishes, like a glass-shard chandelier made of scraps from Murano's glassworks. Standard spring rates, including breakfast, start at around €350 per night for a double room. www.sinahotels.com tel: +39-041-34281



Poli Distillerie

Dining and Grappa

Al Pioppeto, a restaurant just outside Bassano del Grappa, is a great place to try traditional seasonal specialties. Asparagus risotto: €7.50. www.pioppeto.it +39-0424-570-502

The **Poli distillery** (pictured above) runs an interesting museum entirely devoted to grappa, located not far from the city's Palladian bridge. It's possible to loiter at the sampling bar. www.poligrappa.com +390-424-524426

One steady customer for the Veneto's white asparagus has always been Venice, where many restaurants feature all-asparagus menus in April and May. But Corrado Fasolato—chef of the two-star Michelin Met Restaurant, a short walk from Piazza San Marco—emphasizes a single new dish this spring—"a composition" of raw white asparagus and scampi, served with a soft, slowly cooked egg. He says, "If you have asparagus in each course, you don't taste it anymore."

The three-Michelin-starred Le Calandre, just outside Padua about an hour's drive south of Bassano, also forgoes an all-asparagus menu. Known for creating perfume-quality flavor essences, which are then sprayed on food at the last minute, Le Calandre chef Massimiliano Alajmo has just introduced a dish of seaweed ravioli and small penne pasta, each stuffed with a fish filling, served in an intense asparagus broth and sprayed with ginger perfume. Look for it on the restaurant's €225 spring tasting menu.

Mr. Alajmo, 35 years old, says "I close my eyes" when sourcing asparagus, which has led him to favor Paduan producers with fields fed by thermal springs.

Some restaurateurs prefer green asparagus. One is Alfredo Sturlese, owner of Toni del Spin, in

unité for the April 8 buffet in an 18th-century villa outside of town. The feast is named for the Bassanese classic, asparagus and eggs ("ovi e sparasi" in the local dialect), with soft-boiled eggs and olive oil mixed into a simple sauce at the table. The newly created dishes will show up on the restaurants' spring menus.

The next night, the season's main event starts, when another group of restaurants begins a traditional series of sit-down dinners featuring all-asparagus menus, ending with an asparagus dessert, like a cheesecake made with asparagus compote. Those dinners cost €55 (about \$74) a person and last through May, while some associated restaurants feature daily all-asparagus menus. Prize specimens go on display on April 18 in Bassano's Renaissance square, the Piazza Libertà. Starting April 27 in nearby San Zeno di Cassola, a farmers' consortium will sponsor a two-week asparagus festival with music, including a tribute band devoted to Freddie Mercury and Queen.

White asparagus isn't easy to harvest: Kept from the sun in manicured dirt mounds, it must be painstakingly cut at just the right length and thickness. "When you cultivate asparagus, you must have a passion for it. If you don't have that passion, you should do something else," says Bassano farmer Piergiorgio Bizzotto. His asparagus field, which looks a bit like an oversized garden by American standards, is just around the corner from a gas station and a hospital. Each season Mr. Bizzotto, who is 70 years old, will harvest more than 5,000 pounds of asparagus himself, along with his wife, Clara, and a family friend or two. "There are more fun things to do," laughs Ms. Bizzotto, 61, about the daily unearthing of asparagus.

Two local farmers' groups carefully monitor the origin and the quality of their white asparagus. Real Bassano asparagus is bound with willow branches and carries a green or red tag. Fakes from Spain or Peru, Mr. Scomazzon warns, are bound with rubber bands, and passed off at places like Venice's Rialto market.

Then there's the competition—especially from the celebrated white asparagus of Cimadolmo, in Treviso province, about 25 miles north of Venice. Like some Bassanese, who will admit on the sly that Cimadolmo stalks are sweeter, Lidia Bastianich also praises the Cimadolmo product. Farmers there, she says, "have worked on preserving quality."

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the heart of picturesque, canal-lined Treviso, about 25 miles east of Bassano del Grappa. Green asparagus, he says, is increasingly produced by local farmers, and he likes to mix green and white together in the same dish.

In June, it will all be over. Just as white asparagus replaced long, leafy radicchio as the Veneto's featured vegetable, asparagus will give way to peas. The brevity of asparagus's glory, says Ms. Bastianich, is "the beauty of it."

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