



Fuzi with truffles

CROATIAN CUISINE

WHERE CULTURES CONVERGE
AND FLAVORS MINGLE

By Antony Bolante

Approaching Dubrovnik by sea, it's clear why it has been called, "the Pearl of the Adriatic."

Its ancient walls and terracotta rooftops would seem to have been conjured from a mythic tome, yet they greet millions of visitors every year. It's no wonder that UNESCO includes the city — along with nine other places in Croatia — in its carefully curated list of World Heritage sites.

Croatia has been inhabited since antiquity, and over the centuries, its contours and character have been shaped by many cultures and regimes. It's only natural that Croatian cuisine also reflects its varied geography and long history. Flavors that predominate in coastal Croatia are of Greek, Roman, Mediterranean and Italian heritage. Meanwhile, dishes of continental Croatia encompass flavors of Slavic, Hungarian and Turkish origin. But the diversity and depth of these food

traditions are precisely what makes them quintessentially Croatian.

Here's just a sample of Croatian dishes that are as sublime as their surroundings.

SOPARNIK

Though both the Croatian Ministry of Culture and UNESCO have declared it part of Croatia's "intangible cultural heritage," foodies will surely find *soparnik* not only a tangible, but also a tasty finger food. Also known as *zeljanik* or *uljenjak*, this Dalmatian delicacy is a savory pie that features chard, onion, parsley and garlic. However, there are also sweet variations of *soparnik* that include dried fruits or caramel. Originating in the Poljica area of Dalmatia as far back as the late Middle Ages, *soparnik* is widely considered to be an ancestor of the Italian pizza.

To make *soparnik*, strips of Swiss chard — or *blitva*, as the Croatians call it —

chopped onion, parsley and garlic are spread onto dough, which has been rolled into a thin circle. Another layer of dough is placed on top and the edges are sealed. Traditionally, the pie is baked in a *komin*, a hearth heated by coals, until it's a crispy golden brown. Once cooled, the pie is brushed with olive oil infused with finely chopped garlic and parsley and then cut into serving-sized pieces.

The quiet and picturesque coastal town of Dugi Rat (which translates to "long cape") has a festival dedicated to *soparnik* in late July, but you're sure to find this popular dish year round and throughout Croatia.

ISPOD PEKE

One of Dalmatia's signature culinary offerings isn't a particular dish, but rather a type of cooking, called *peka*. *Peka* refers to a traditional technique in which vegetables and spices are combined with meat or



Restaurant in Korčula, Croatia

seafood in a pan that's covered with a bell-shaped lid, or *cripnja*. The lid, in turn, is covered with hot embers and the contents left to cook until the meat is tender and the vegetables infused with flavor. Although a range of ingredients can simmer "under the bell," why not try a variation unique to a region situated on the clear waters of the Adriatic Sea: octopus *peka*, or *ispod peke*. But whatever kind of *peka* you favor, remember that it typically takes a few hours to prepare, so it's wise to order in advance. And don't forget to get some fresh, crusty bread to soak up every flavorful drop.

CRNI RIZOT

Black risotto can be found across Mediterranean cuisines, and Croatia's *crni rizot* probably owes its origins to the Venetian Republic, which controlled Dalmatia during the Middle Ages. This doesn't make the dish any less Croatian; in fact, *crni rizot* is widely considered to be a national dish and required dining for any visitor. The defining ingredient of *crni rizot* is cuttlefish, and its ink provides the dish not only with its characteristic black color, but also adds to its rich, savory flavor. (Additionally, the ink has been shown to have healthy antioxidant properties.) Cooked with white wine, butter, olive oil and garlic, *crni rizot* can also incorporate squid, prawns, mussels or clams. Finished with a sprinkle of finely grated Parmesan cheese, it's as visually striking as it is delicious. In case you were wondering: yes, the ink will temporarily color your smile. And yes, you'll be smiling.

FUZI

Croatia's Istrian peninsula is famous for its cuisine, which is inflected both by its location and history. Given its proximity and historical ties to Italy, it's no surprise that Istria has developed its own pasta, a trademark variety called *fuzi*.

To make *fuzi*, pasta dough is rolled into thin sheets, and cut into diamond shapes. Then, two corners of each diamond are pinched together to form a tube with quill-shaped ends. Depending on the dish, *fuzi* highlights Istria's varied culinary influences — from an Italian-inspired veal ragu to a beef stew or chicken goulash that reflects Croatia's Hungarian ties. But some of the most delectable *fuzi* recipes feature an undeniably indigenous ingredient, Istrian truffles.



A FISH MUST SWIM THREE TIMES: ONCE IN THE SEA, ONCE IN OLIVE OIL AND ONCE IN WINE.

ISTRIAN TRUFFLES

As every epicurean knows, this difficult-to-cultivate and hard-to-find fungus is considered a delicacy. Yet, many are surprised to learn that Croatia is a major source of both black truffles and the highly prized white variety. In fact, for many years, Croatian white truffles were exported on the black market to be sold as truffles from Alba, Italy, a region renowned as a truffle capital. Today, Istrian truffles are recognized as equal to their more famous

counterparts — but luckily, they are still more abundant and less expensive. So don't pass up your chance to enjoy freshly made *fuzi* pasta crowned with a generous portion of white truffle shavings.

GREGADA & BRUDET

There's a saying in Dalmatia: "A fish must swim three times: once in the sea, once in olive oil and once in wine." This aphorism is the guiding principle behind Croatia's traditional fish stews, *gregada* and *brudet*.

Gregada is made by sautéing sliced onions in olive oil, then slices of potato and garlic. Large pieces of fish are added to the dish and braised in a mix of water and white wine for about 20 minutes. This simple yet mouthwatering dish is closely associated with the island of Hvar, but is popular throughout coastal Croatia. *Gregada* can include any fresh, firm white fish; in Croatia, conger, grouper and monkfish are common choices.

Gregada was probably brought to Croatia's shores by Greek settlers around 380 B.C. — so long ago, Epicurus himself could have enjoyed it! (Potatoes, however, were a slightly more recent addition to the original recipe.)

The recipe for *brudet* also requires the fish to swim three times, though this stew has a rich, red broth ("brudet" comes from the Venetian word for broth, *brodeto*) made from tomatoes, red wine and plenty of garlic, along with other vegetables and spices. Recipes for *brudet* vary widely from kitchen to kitchen, but many recommend using at least three types of fish: a denser, meatier fish; a flaky and flavorful fish; and an oily fish that will also help thicken the sauce. And why stop there? Shrimp and mussels are also welcome to the party.

Finally, a nice soft polenta makes the perfect accompaniment to any Croatian fish stew.

Dobar tek!