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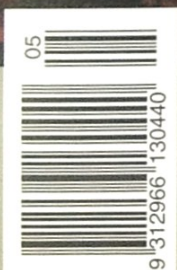
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MATT PRESTON
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eat out.



autumn on a plate

Matt Preston says forget the guide books and visit Italy off-season, at least once in your lifetime.

Certain parts of the world do autumn particularly well. North-east Victoria is one such spot. At this time of year, the woods are filled with mushrooms and local game is at its best – both of which dominate Patrizia Simone's menu at one of my favourite Italian spots, Simone's of Bright. The leaves are pretty special, too, although they can't compete with the reds and golds you'd see driving through New England in the US.

No place, however, can eclipse autumn in Italy – or more specifically, the top half of the boot. There's warm sunshine, but still a crispness in the air, so it's okay to have three courses at lunch. And what lunches! (And dinners... and breakfasts.) Not to mention snacks of salami or shepherd's cheese eaten by the roadside, made by a real shepherd and sold by him, too.

Last autumn, I was there with the woman I love, starting in Milan and travelling south to Umbria. In Milan we jostled at the counters of Zucca and Cova among the elbows of chic cashmere-clad Milanese, our confidence buoyed by teeny cups of caffeinated velvet. Then we found ourselves seated next to Internazionale's goal-scoring machine Samuel Eto'o at Cracco, where Carlo Cracco's tiny pot of coddled eggs buried under a leaf litter of shaved local truffle prompted us to coin the cliché we used throughout our trip – 'autumn on a plate'.

We wanted to stop in the picture-perfect provincial town Parma, but gave up after getting lost, even with the help of our satellite navigator. So we drove south to Modena, the home of that other black gold, balsamic vinegar.

Modena is an elegant walled city that lives to eat. It's also home to two of my best meals of the year. Behind the Giusti family deli is a little dining room of four tables. The food is classic local stuff, executed with finesse. We drank lambrusco, which cut through the stickiness of crumbed *cotechino* sausage and local *culatello* – cured pig sliced thinly and laid to warm

over puffs of fried dough. There was also potted pork, slow-braised veal cheeks and, in another 'autumn on a plate' moment, homemade tagliatelle with porcini picked that morning.

We dined twice at Massimo Bottura's Osteria Francescana, where food is inspirational, quixotic and sometimes perplexing – think an autumnal Golden Gaytime of cool foie gras crusted in hazelnuts and filled with a tart explosion of aged balsamic.

We moved on. In Chianti, it was just cold enough to justify a rich bean stew. In Perugia, the chocolate festival was in full flow and the local hazelnuts came with the richness of cocoa. We fell in love with these *baci* and the crumbling ancient city.

If Tuscany is a supermodel, Umbria is a Cinecittà screen siren in her last flush of beauty – slightly time-worn but far sexier. In Norcia we shopped for cured meats of deer and pigs fattened on acorns. We walked the Assisi streets and up the olive-lined route to Saint Francis' mountain hermitage, returning to plates of wild boar, beef from ancient Chianina cattle and chestnuts gathered from the woods, all cooked over an open fire.

We drove on to eat the famed Castelluccio lentils and buy aged pecorino made from flocks of sheep that were soon to be driven from these high plains by the first snows of winter. We foraged for truffles in the hills behind Gubbio with friends of Patrizia (who was born in Umbria, which may explain her love for Victoria's north-east). We found white, black, red and summer truffles, plus acidic wild grapes and a mildly aggressive viper. The truffles were so vibrant and pungent, even the soil around them reeked. They made those we see in Australia seem ghostly, with their fleeting aroma and flavour.

That evening, I returned to our converted 11th-century farmhouse to cook *strangozzi*, the curly Umbrian pasta. I added slices of fresh white truffle, then drizzled over melted butter and the heat drove the truffle fragrance up to my nose. It was simple and divine. It was 'autumn on a plate', Italian style. **d.**