

Perhaps, I thought afterwards, it had been somewhat of a gamble, precarious even, sending five unseasoned travellers from Africa into the unknown sophistication of an ancient realm, which, in a sense, is inconceivable for a South African to fully comprehend. Perhaps it was after all ill conceived, sending them into a linguistically challenged cauldron of cultural complexities; a cauldron that constitutes the arcane and intricate history of a country that birthed the likes of Julius Caesar, Leonardo de Vinci, Pluto and Ferraris ... and pizza, pasta, Prosecco, prosciutto, Parma, Parmesan and all the other wonderful "P's".

How can you expect five sun-drenched Africans to adapt overnight from 15 hours of daylight to just 8 hours, from 32°C to just 5°C, and still demand of them instant experience, instant learning and instant passion, while living in such dissimilar surroundings and in such a fleeting space of time?

Perhaps it was ill-conceived ...

Or perhaps it was sheer genius!

It is never too much to be expected to present oneself in a humble spirit: even the most learned and experienced person should be able to present himself as a student. And that was what we - the band of travellers - decided beforehand would be our approach toward this adventure. We wholly opened ourselves to all the learning and experiences to be had. We vowed that no rank would separate us, no sight would be missed by us, no beer, wine or drink would remain untasted, and no food would remain on any plate - for who knew when we would pass again through such a giant in food and fare?



Venice

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I am very proud to declare that that was exactly what we did: we never sat still, but explored, tasted, drank and were wowed by the sights, sounds, tastes, and emotions. We took photos, tried to speak to the locals, learned sign language, wondered in awe at the hundreds of cafés and pastry shops and got to know a culture of checcetis, café correcti grapa, spritz, and what the Italians refer to as "the art of doing nothing".

Pordenone, where we stayed, is some 70km Northeast of Venice and is the most beautiful

of cities. On the Sunday when we arrived, I texted my wife and said, *"It's like Monte Casino, but the REAL thing!"* And it is! Our hotel was modest, but more than sufficient for our needs... and it was right in the centre of Pordenone, which of course presented a unique opportunity. We had access to everything by foot as the Italians, as we discovered, walk everywhere. For the people who created Ferrari and Lamborghini, Italians are surprisingly indifferent to cars. But why drive if you can buy Gucci a block away, or get pastry better than any found in any 5 Star hotel in SA just around the corner? The food in Italy, in general, is incredible! It was a chefs' heaven: the best gelato, best pizza, best focaccia, best ciabatta, best risotto, best pasta ... Everything was better than anything we're used to at home. It's been some weeks since we've been back, and I still cannot get myself to eat a pizza or pasta or panini here. It's an insult.

On the Monday after our arrival we were scheduled some time off to experience Venice. Even though it was rainy, windy and cold, Venice welcomed us to her bosom of beauty with open arms. The city is so, so much more than just mere scenery: it is ancient, heavy with history, and you could feel its staying power in the air. It felt like history was swallowing you whole, and we loved it! We don't have that in South Africa. These were old walls, old canals, old memories. It *smelled* of history. Venice is like a thousand year old Monica Bellucci, still looking twenty and in her prime! It is incredible, or as Chef Silvano (who I shall talk about momentarily) says about everything Italian, *"It is inkredibol."*

Although it felt like we were on holiday, our trip was not all play and no work. What were we actually doing in Italy?

Electrolux Professional had invited us to participate in a training program in Innovative Cooking Techniques that was presented at their regional headquarters and production plant in Pordenone, Italy. It was part of a greater initiative after Electrolux South Africa arranged for a state-of-the-art kitchen to be built at HTA, fully equipped with the latest Electrolux equipment. In South Africa, Electrolux is known mainly for domestic appliances, but we learned that in Europe, and elsewhere in the world, Electrolux is one of the biggest suppliers of kitchen equipment. They are also the leading "green" kitchen equipment production company.

We remained true to our vow to learn all we could. Electrolux's training centre and showrooms are amazing! They manufacture everything any chef could possibly dream of and we felt like small children in a toyshop before Christmas. It was truly an eye-opening experience. The technology and thought that goes into their equipment is light-years ahead of our local brands, and everything is environmentally-consciously manufactured with energy reduction a key focus point. Some of their advanced grill plates can save up to 70% energy compared to normal grill plates!

From humidity-controlled cabins, to low temperature cooking cycles, to sous-vide, cook-chill, convection-steam-dry-moist-spraying pre-programmable touch screen combi ovens, they have it all. We cooked whole sirloin at 75% humidity at 54°C for 15hrs and it came out perfectly, evenly pink and moist right through. We cooked octopus, crème anglaise, apples, radicchio, chicken, veal, sea bass, and everything else we could get our hands on sous vide style, and it was delicious. It converted us all to the ultimate sous vide fans. We made focaccia and ciabatta that took us more than 15 hrs to make, and it was the best we've ever tasted. We learned how to make risotto and pasta the Italian way, and learned that true *al dente* is quite different to how we believe it should be. We learned how to use all their equipment and were amazed at its functionality, ingenuity and flexibility.

We learned that it is in fact possible to make bread with ice water, with the ice blocks still in the water and then in the batter, and that this was actually the preferred way of doing it in Italy. It was unexpected, but characteristic of our stay in Italy. Although everything was somewhat unexpected, none was more so than the generous and hospitable manner in which we were hosted and entertained by our hosts, Master Chefs Silvano Constantini and Pasquale Esposito.

I don't think the trip would have been half the experience it was if it hadn't been for Chefs Silvano and Pasquale. We shared a lot of laughs. Just ask Albin about OB1Kenobi, Grant about Lindsey Lohan, Kea about being *the Disciple* and Madelein about her failed attempt at Afrikaans in the local supermarket in Pordenone!

A lot of memories were made, and somewhere amongst all the activity, we also made some really good friends. Our farewell on the last day was a sad and humbling affair, and I know, just like the rest of my band of chefs, that we will always look back on this week as *the best we ever had!*



Story By:

**Chef Morné**

