

At the Games Antipasto Isn't Anticlimatic

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TURIN, Italy — The chef bounds out of his kitchen with the joy of a gold-medal winner.

"The food! The food!" shouts Alessandro Boglione, when asked about his specialties. "All that's possible to eat!"

Chef Boglione hails from a nearby town called Bra, home of the "slow food" movement, an antithesis to the fast-food culture. The slow fooders cook with local ingredients and linger over every morsel. That is Mr. Boglione's specialty.

"This is something that is inside of us. We seek a perfect taste that you can't miss," he says. "You enjoy it so much, you get a psychological boost as well."

Italy, and particularly Turin's surrounding region of Piedmont, celebrates its food and the ritual of eating even more lustily, perhaps, than it embraces its sports. Here, too, the passengers of the Olympic gravy train — the corporate sponsors, hangers-ons and other high rollers who flock to the Games — have been sharing a seat at the athletes' training table, for the same carb-loaded pastas that are featured on many precompetition menus are also the highlights of the hospitality buffets.

"Absolutely, our guests need the pasta. Otherwise, they get tired, too," says Mr. Boglione, who is the executive chef at AB+ restaurant, which is housed in a 16th-century nobleman's residence in downtown Turin that has been taken over by U.S.-based Jet Set Sports as a hospitality center for a number of corporate clients. The chef was part of the deal.

During the Olympics, Mr. Boglione has been whipping up homemade pasta with a number of sauces: artichoke and clams; lamb ragu and pecorino cheese; mint and sausage from Bra. He's also been serving beef with polenta, lamb chops with roasted artichokes and duck in red wine and maple syrup sauce.

For an athlete preparing to compete, he says he would concoct spaghetti with tomato and basil, topped with Parmigiano. "It is one of the easiest dishes," he says, "but also one of the most difficult to prepare properly."

At Casa Barilla, in a golf club south of Turin's city center, the star is Roberto Bassi, the top chef of Parma-based Barilla, Europe's largest pasta maker. Pasta, he notes proudly, is one of the best fuels for athletes because the low sugar content slows the absorption of the carbohydrates into the system so that energy levels can be maintained more evenly.

Casa Barilla boasts a heavily stocked lunch and dinner buffet that is open to just about anyone who knocks on the door. There is also a bar run by Danish brewer Carlsberg and coffee from Illy of Trieste.

In addition to preparing the twice-daily feasts with his hand-picked assistants, Mr. Bassi offers cooking lessons to whomever happens to drop by. One pupil was U.S. figure skater Nancy Kerrigan. Bode Miller, the American skier who wears the Barilla logo on his helmet during non-Olympic races, also sat down for lunch, though he stayed out of the kitchen.

Mr. Miller dug into a plate of spaghetti with anchovies and vegetables topped with Parmigiano. Alas, although it may have aided his stamina, it didn't help his performance; Mr. Miller, who won two medals at the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics, has so far been shut out in four races.

Mr. Bassi is a native of the Emilia Romagna region, home to such delicacies as Parmigiano cheese and Bolognese sauce, among others. But in an ode to Piedmontese cuisine, he has been serving penne pasta with fonduta, or fondue, in which the pasta is covered with melted fontina cheese — a local favorite — and served with white truffles grated on top.

The day before an event, he recommends eating lots of pasta with a sauce of light vegetables, a dab of raw extra-virgin olive oil and topped with Parmigiano.

Parmigiano (also known as Parmesan) is a favorite at the Bank of America Hometown Hopefuls hospitality house. "In Italy, the Parmigiano is very important as the topping," says Chef Helal Wasef Wasfy, who came to Piedmont from Egypt 30 years ago. He goes by the name of Chef Michel. "Parmigiano has good amounts of protein per fat ratio," he explains. "And, of course, it has a very good taste."

Bowls of Parmigiano adorn the buffet table along with specialties like bowtie pasta with zucchini, sausage and tomato, pasta al pesto, gnocchi pomodoro, panzerotti with salmon and rigatoni with four cheese sauce. The house is open to all U.S. athletes and their families and friends. The buffet has also offered veal stew, sea bass filet, shrimp and plenty of salad. There is a pizza bar and a table laden with various pastries for desert.

"We wanted an Italian flair," says Allison Gardiner, Bank of America's strategic marketing executive for Olympics and golf. "We want people to experience Italy when they're in Italy."

"Just what we need," says the father of speedskater Amy Sannes as he tucks into the bowtie pasta and a salad. "It hits the spot."

Moments later, during a pep rally for the U.S. women's hockey team (which won a bronze medal), one of the players' mothers shouted into the microphone, "We love the Italian food and the vino."

For the players themselves, Chef Michel would offer pasta with vegetables and a pesto-basil sauce and maybe a small piece of meat in extra-virgin olive oil. "Something that is very easy to digest," he says.

The schmoozing mecca in Turin is, appropriately, Casa Italia, which has recruited culinary experts from all over the country and attracted the A-list of Italian celebrities. Housed in the 17th-century Palazzo del Valentino, it's also the place where Italian athletes go to celebrate after winning a medal. It is a shrine to Italian products and comestibles, from wine, which flows freely, to tables stacked with cheese and mortadella, known outside of Italy as bologna.

One of the top chefs involved in preparing the menu is Carlo Zarri, a sommelier and fourth-generation Piedmontese restaurateur. One of the most-requested local dishes: risotto al limone e rosmarino (risotto with lemon and rosemary). Mr. Zarri insists that Italian cuisine is high-performance food because it has a lot of in-season ingredients and isn't overly laden with butter or cream. Of course, he says, it's also full of carbs.

His recommended prerace diet: mozzarella and tomatoes, known as caprese in Italian, followed by a Piedmontese specialty, ravioli al plin, a hand-made pasta stuffed with meat and vegetables, topped only with olive oil and a bit of grated Parmigiano. He recommends a very light second course of prosciutto di Parma sliced thinly accompanied by — what else? — Parmigiano.

Schmoozers and athletes alike would do well to heed this chef's recommendation. Mr. Zarri also worked at the Casa Italia in Athens at the 2004 Summer Olympics, where the speedwalker Ivano Brugnetti chose to dine for five consecutive days before his 20 kilometer race.

"Each night, he ate a half kilo of pasta with only extra-virgin olive oil and Parmigiano," recalls Mr. Zarri. "Then he won a gold medal."