



LEGENDS OF LIGURIA

Alan Tardi examines how three regional specialties, all with a hard-as-a-rock biscuit in common, provide more historical, economical, and sociological questions than answers. However, that these dishes should still be considered is beyond debate. Photos by Colin Dutton. ►

Galette del marinaio—hardtack—the specialty of Panificio Maccarini.



To the bakery born: Italo Maccarini (seated), who inherited Panificio Maccarini from his father, has in turn left it for his daughter Valeria Maccarini-Olivari and her husband, Gianluca Olivari, to run.

Between the picturesque former fishing villages of Camogli and Portofino in Liguria is a nature reserve called the Parco di Portofino. In the park is a network of foot trails that allows visitors to walk from one town to the other, providing, of course, they're in good shape. One of the more demanding routes, marked *molto impegnativo*, requires scrambling over rocky cliffs using metal chains to grasp onto, high above the sparkling blue sea.

From the starting point in Camogli, the path climbs straight up through olive groves along a twisting route consisting mostly of stone steps. When, panting and sweaty, a hiker finally reaches the little hamlet of San Rocco atop the promontory, one of the first things he comes across is the **Panificio Maccarini**. This place, founded in 1885, serves as a sort of general store and a pit stop for both residents of this little community as well as those passing through. Besides bread, pastries, and deliciously thin, just-out-of-the-oven *focaccia* (there is usually one filled with cheese and another with minced greens and ricotta), the shop offers a selection of fresh vegetables, packaged foods, water, bottled beverages, espresso, and wine. But its real specialty is trumpeted proudly on the sign hanging right outside the door: *galletta del marinaio*.

Galletta—the name is thought to come from the Italian word *galea*, or galley, an ancient type of ship—is the local version of sea biscuit or hard tack, a form of sustenance long used by sailors and soldiers undertaking a long journey to remote places. While sailor's biscuits are usually quite hard and rather tasteless, they have one redeeming quality: they don't spoil, which, in extreme cases, makes them a quite welcome alternative to starvation.

Liguria is an extreme place, where mountains meet the Mediterranean and where the people have a long, intimate, and inexorable rapport with the sea. Until not too long ago, most Ligurians lived off it and spent a good part of their lives upon it. Fishermen set out from small villages in even smaller boats, sometimes for days at a time, while commercial ships from the major port city of Genoa set sail for the far reaches of the world. The larger ships would load their galleys full of *gallette*, while fishermen would pack a handful, along with other provisions that could withstand the harsh conditions and test of time.

Even the lives of those who didn't actually venture out upon the water were directly affected by their close proximity to it, and inhabitants of small, practically inaccessible villages in the hills were no less isolated and vulnerable to the forces of nature than the men at sea. "When we were kids," recalls

Gianni Bisso, owner, along with his twin brother, **Vittorio**, of the classic restaurant **Da Ö Vittorio** in Recco, founded in 1895, “we used to have *gallette* mixed with warm milk, sugar, and honey for breakfast. People always had them on hand. In those days, you couldn’t just go out and buy fresh bread. Many villages didn’t even have roads!”

Now the number of fishermen has dwindled and most ships are well-equipped with modern conveniences, including kitchens. So what is the point of continuing to make *gallette del marinaio*, much less base a business upon them? Today, few bakeries continue to make them. But, of those that do, Panificio Maccarini’s are unanimously considered the best. “The Maccarini’s *gallette* are light and brittle; they’re easy to eat, and they don’t break your teeth,” says David Downie, the author of *Food, Wine, The Italian Riviera & Genoa* and part-time resident of San Rocco. “I’ve traveled thousands of miles through Liguria, visiting every bakery and food shop, and no one else makes them in this authentic way.”

The recipe is very simple: make a soft dough of flour, water, salt, olive oil, yeast, and malt; roll it out into a sheet; cut out disks about five inches in diameter; puncture them with a docker or fork; bake them in the oven. The real difference comes from

Panificio Maccarini’s three generations of experience and their steadfast commitment to continue making *gallette* as they always have. Sort of.

Though Panificio Maccarini is still a hand-crafted operation, a modern deck oven that replaced the original wood-burning oven decades ago (the new oven has steam injection, which helps the *gallette* cook evenly and thoroughly) and a custom-designed attachment to the sheeter machine that cuts out the dough disks allow the bakery to produce hundreds of *gallette* a day. But, if the number of sailors has shrunk and necessity has been replaced by convenience, who do they sell them to? “Locals buy them,” says **Italo Maccarini**, who was born into the bakery and eventually took it over from his father. Though he officially retired five years ago—the business now belongs to his perpetually smiling daughter **Valeria Maccarini-Olivari** and her husband, **Gianluca Olivari**—he still stops by most mornings to help out. “Passing tourists buy *gallette* as a souvenir and we ship them throughout the world. But mostly we sell them to restaurants.”



Which raises another question: What use could restaurants possibly have for sailors’ provisions? The answer is simple: these humble biscuits are an essential ingredient in three classic dishes of traditional Ligurian cuisine—*cappon magro*, *capponadda*, and *condiggion*. All three room-temperature appetizers (though they’re sometimes eaten as one-dish meals) combine elements of surf and turf and share several key ingredients besides *gallette del marinaio*. But there are significant differences too.

Liguria, which curves around the Mediterranean coast like a backwards “C”, is divided in two basic sections, with the city of Genoa in the middle: the upper half, which arches up the Riviera dei Fiori to the French border, is known as the Ponente, because that’s where the sun sets, while the southern half is called the Levante, because that’s where it rises. And along this arc, each of the three dishes has a particular place it calls home.

Condiggion (also *condiglione* or *condijon*) is a quickspur-of-the-moment kind of dish of water- and vinegar-moistened *gallette*, tuna in oil, thinly sliced red onions, tomatoes, anchovies, capers, black olives, sweet peppers, and *mosciame* (salted, air-dried tuna loin), tossed with Ligurian olive oil and sea salt, and garnished with hard-boiled eggs. Other ingredients, such as cucumbers,

string beans, lettuce, or basil, may be freely added at will. Found throughout the Ponente from Genoa to Ventimiglia, *condiggion* is reminiscent of the much more famous *salade niçoise* found just across the French border. Some even refer to *condiggion* as the Italian *salade niçoise*, but perhaps it would be more accurate the other way around. While it’s hard to say definitively which came first, considering that *condiggion* was historically much more widely distributed along the Italian coast than *salade niçoise* has ever been along the French one, and given the pervasive influence of Italian cuisine on the cooking of Nice, it may be assumed that the dish originated in Italy and found its way to France, where boiled potatoes fill in for the *gallette del marinaio*. Unlike the *niçoise* version, which now appears on menus throughout France, it’s difficult to find *condiggion* on a restaurant menu in Italy, perhaps because it’s viewed more as a quick do-it-yourself dish to prepare at home.

The same could be said for *capponadda* (also spelled *capponnadda*), a classic dish of the Levante, especially of the area between Genoa and Sestri Levante, except that in this case the

“home” is at sea. While it tastes just as good on terra firma, this dish was clearly created by fishermen to be prepared and consumed on a boat out on the water. The ingredients—*gallette*, olive oil, tuna, *mosciame*, Taggiasca olives, capers, anchovies, onions, and garlic—are all easy to stock on a boat. The hard-boiled eggs were a luxury, and the fresh tomatoes that are now a fixture of *capponadda* were not part of the original dish. “Tomatoes didn’t even arrive in the area until the beginning of the 18th century,” notes Paolo Lingua, coordinator of the region of Liguria for the Italian Culinary Academy, “so they were a relatively recent addition to the existing recipe.”

Whereas *capponadda* and *condiggion* are quick, cheap, satisfying “dishes of the people,” *cappon magro* is an elaborate time-consuming production consisting of numerous steps and incorporating expensive hard-to-come-by ingredients along with the staples. *Cappon magro* was a special-occasion dish of the aristocracy and well-to-do residents of the metropolis of Genoa, and was the preparation of choice when a seaman returned from a long voyage. Here, in addition to the de rigeur *gallette*, *mosciame*, olives, hard-boiled egg, and capers, is a vast assortment of vegetables—both fresh (boiled) and preserved—a variety of cooked seafood, including *cappon* (capon), *nassel* (hake), *ombrina* (sea bass), shrimp, scallops, prawns, mussels, lobster, and raw oysters, and abundant *salsa verde*. “*Cappon magro* is the consummation of the wedding between land and sea,” Fred Plotkin writes in his excellent book on Ligurian cuisine, *Recipes from Paradise: Life and Food on the Italian Riviera*, which includes recipes for all three dishes, “and is so unusual because it contains practically all of the non-sweet ingredients of the region.” Also unusual is that how these ingredients are arranged is as much a part of the dish as how it tastes. “Some of the presentations are extremely flamboyant, baroque architectural constructions,” Plotkin notes. “More than just a meal, it was a way for people to show off and impress. Sometimes it still is.” Plotkin admits to making the dish himself on occasion, “but once a year at the most; it’s too much work!”

Typically the *gallette*, moistened with water and vinegar, are placed in the center of a plate or platter, a layer of cooked seafood is arranged on top of the *gallette*, followed by a layer of vegetables, which is then topped with a layer of different seafood, then another layer of vegetables, etc. Each layer is covered with *salsa verde* (and in some cases even gelatin), and the final construction is garnished with lobster, prawns, oysters, *mosciame*, mushrooms, and hard-boiled eggs, the more elaborate the better.

Cappon magro is thought to have been created for a powerful curate who had to give an important dinner for wealthy benefactors. Because it fell on the evening before Easter—a *magro* (lean) day on the religious calendar—meat could not be consumed, so the creative chef came up with this meatless but

Opposite: The marina of Camogli, with moored fishing boats and pleasure craft, located on the Gulf of Paradise in Liguria. The extravagant show-off *cappon magro* (top) and the plebeian fisherman’s *capponadda* (bottom), as prepared at restaurant Manuelina in Recco.





Is this the origin of *salade niçoise*? The humble and historic *condiggion* at restaurant *Manuelina*.

nonetheless impressive and extravagant preparation. Word got out, and the lean-but-luxurious dish spread to other wealthy (or wannabe wealthy) Genoese. “Over time *cappon magro* became more an indicator of social status than religiosity,” says Plotkin, “a way for the normally frugal Genoese to pull out all the stops and say, ‘This moment is special.’”

There remains a bit of controversy about the origins of the name, and thus the origins of the dish itself. One camp maintains it’s named after the fish called *cappone* that often appears in *cappon magro*, while the other insists it refers not to the fish but to the fowl, a castrated rooster, which, whether boiled, roasted, or turned into an elaborate salad, is a typical non-*magro* feast dish. *Cappon magro*, they suggest, is essentially a meatless version of *cappone*, a way to celebrate and indulge while being religiously correct. In fact, the recipe and preparation of another dish of the Genoese bourgeois, *galantina di cappone*, is almost as elaborate and labor-intensive as that of *cappon magro*. I tend to agree with the second explanation. *Cappone* is, after all, only one of the many fishes that might wind up in *cappon magro* and is in no way essential. Plus, if the dish carried the name of the fish, the *magro* part of it would be redundant.

There would also seem to be a logical connection between *capponadda* and *cappon magro*; they exist in more or less the

same place, and even the names are similar. But did the elaborate *cappon magro* develop out of the simple fisherman’s dish or did *capponadda* originate as a humble imitation of the rich man’s holiday lunch? Some people, including Downie, are convinced the more complicated dish evolved out of the simpler one. But why would wealthy people, with no physical or economic constraints, choose to incorporate fishermen’s hard-tack into the centerpiece of their holiday meal? “Don’t forget that the Genoese were seafarers, and many well-to-do families either were shipbuilders, shipowners, or captains, or descended from them,” says Downie. “Much of the cooking of the Italian Riviera evolved from very simple dishes that could be prepared onboard a ship, or on the shore, or up in the terraced hills. In any case, the Genoese themselves believe *cappon magro* grew out of *capponadda*, so if they’re wrong, please don’t tell them so. They’ll be very disappointed.”

Lingua agrees. “*Capponadda* and *condiggion* are popular preparations that preceded the elaboration of the noble *cappon magro*, which originated in the 18th century as the aristocratic dish of the Christmas Eve vigil and from there went on to become a fixture of luxurious banquets and lunches of well-to-do Genoese merchants.”

On the other hand, **Gianni Carbone**, owner of restaurant **Manuelina** in Recco, which has been preparing *cappon magro* for over 100 years, believes the more elaborate version came first. “The dish was born in the kitchens of powerful families and clergy in keeping with the religious precept against eating meat on certain days,” he claims. “Due to the richness of its ingredients and appearance, it took on the name ‘*cappone*,’ and from there it trickled down to the masses. *Capponadda* was the working class imitation of the aristocratic dish. After all, most of the cooks and domestics who worked in the kitchens of the wealthy were wives of fishermen.”

This makes sense. *Capponadda* neither looks like a capon nor involves the fish called *cappone*. If *capponadda* came first, where would the name have come from? Or, perhaps, the simpler sailor’s dish came first but was nameless until after *cappon magro* had been disseminated?

While speculation about the possible connection between these three dishes raises interesting issues of the interplay between necessity and extravagance, rich and poor, land and sea, and the evolution of traditional cuisine, we will probably never know for certain which came first or how they’re intertwined. The important thing is that *condiggion*, *capponadda*, and *cappon magro* still exist and still remain a fixture in the cuisine of their respective areas. And that a few bakeries, Panificio Maccarini chief among them, still bake *galletta del marinaio* much as they always have and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Alan Tardi, a chef, writer, and wine/restaurant consultant, divides his time between Italy and the United States. His book *Romancing the Vine* won the 2006 James Beard Foundation Wine and Spirits book award.