



Cycling in Northern Italy &

Orecchiette with Sausage, Mushrooms & Radicchio

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September is my favorite month.

Filled with warm, sunny days and cool, crisp nights, I try to spend as much time as I can outdoors. When I lived in Switzerland, September was a great time to take a sports holiday. The crowds of tourists thinned out as the days shortened and the air cooled down. Over the years, I hiked and biked all over Switzerland, France and Italy.

My friend John went along on a few of these adventures. Not to be confused with my brother of the same name, John was a willing companion for skiing, hiking and bike trips. However, there was one not so little problem. John's life was filled with a multitude of minor mishaps and at least a few major calamities. One of my favorites was the time his car overheated in the middle of rush hour traffic. Unlike most cars, his didn't stall and refuse to budge. No, John's car burst into flames. Things just happened to John ... and to anyone who traveled with him.

A bicycle trip, whether for two days or ten, takes a bit of planning and some negotiation. Maps are examined and destinations debated to find the perfect route with great views and not too many hills or heavy traffic. To complicate matters, when autumn days grow shorter you need to keep an eye on the clock as well as the map. Start too late in the morning or linger too long over lunch (or both) and you may very well finish your ride in the dark.

Trips with John never got off to an early start and always included a long, leisurely lunch. Sounds delightful, doesn't it? Sure, except at least one slightly terrifying ride. First we missed the 10:03 train for Domodossola, the starting point for a long cycling weekend in Italy. Of course it was John's fault. He always had trouble getting started in the morning. Feigning a frazzled and hurried look, he rode into the Geneva train station about fifteen minutes after our train had come and gone.

Luckily, there was another at 10:33. (I somehow suppose he already knew that.) It made a few more stops so we arrived in Domodossola about an hour later than planned. Our peddling was further postponed when John insisted we stop for lunch. He was hungry, we were in Italy and a quick sandwich would not do.

Finally, we were off and making our way down a quaint but narrow country road. Before too long the sun dipped down behind the trees. The blue sky turned to pink and then gray and finally black. There were no street lights. No ambient lighting from nearby stores and cafés. It was a country road; there were no stores, no cafés or houses. Every few minutes a car whizzed by, threatening to force us into the ditch. With white knuckles clutching my handle bars, I peddled and fumed until we finally arrived on Lago Maggiore's picturesque shore. A momentarily contrite John offered to buy dinner. I accepted.

At the end of the same long weekend, just a few miles from the train which would take us home, it began to rain. Not a gentle mist mind you, it was an icy cold deluge. Next the quiet bike path we'd been enjoying abruptly ended and turned onto a major highway. Cars and trucks roared by at eighty or more miles an hour. It didn't matter if it was his fault or not; I blamed John.

All that said, in spite of the rough start and end to the weekend, it was a success. The views along Lago Maggiore were spectacular, the conversation was fun and fast-faced, the food was delicious and the wine delightful.

Enjoy the open road and the early autumn sunshine. Bon appétit!

Orecchiette with Sausage, Mushrooms and Radicchio

After a long bicycle ride there is nothing like some delicious pasta! Enjoy!

Serves 4

About 12 ounces spicy or sweet Italian sausage
 About 8 ounces orecchiette (ear-shaped pasta) or conchiglie (medium shells)
 Olive oil
 1 small red onion, chopped
 4 cloves garlic, minced
 About 12 ounces mushrooms, preferably wild, thickly sliced
 1/4 teaspoon or to taste dried red pepper flakes
 Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
 1/2 cup dry white wine
 1/2 cup chicken stock or broth
 About 8 ounces radicchio, cored and thinly sliced
 About 1/4 cup chopped and toasted walnuts
 Freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

Put the sausages on a rimmed baking dish and roast at 375 degrees, turning once or twice, for about 30 minutes or until cooked through. Drain on paper towels and reserve.

Cook the pasta in salted boiling water according to package directions. Drain the pasta, reserving a little of the pasta water.

Meanwhile, heat a little olive oil in large, heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Add the onion, garlic and red pepper and sauté for 2 minutes. Add the mushrooms and sauté until lightly browned, about 10 minutes. Add the wine and stock and cook until the liquid is reduced by half. Add the radicchio, toss to combine and cook for 2-3 minutes.

Cut the sausages into 1/2-inch rounds. Reduce the heat to medium, add the sausage and pasta to the vegetables and toss to combine. If the pasta seems a little dry, add a few tablespoons of pasta water. Cover and cook for 1 minute. Spoon the pasta, sausage and vegetables into individual shallow bowls or onto a large platter, sprinkle with toasted walnuts and freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano and serve. Pass additional Parmigiano-Reggiano.

