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Nectar of the gods is a taste of heaven

THE CURIOUS COOK
Rob Dunlop

It is the golden nectar of popes and noblemen. Sciaccheta (pronounced *sha-ke-tra*) is a rare and difficult to make dessert wine born of ancient lands along the Cinque Terre, a rocky stretch of the Italian Riviera.

Dante waxed lyrical about sciaccheta in the 14th century, but it is a sommelier in Rome who really gets me going. He almost stops breathing as he describes an "unmistakable fragrance" of cocoa and apricot and maquis (aromatic Mediterranean shrubs).

Sciaccheta enjoys the reputation of being a precious commodity reserved for the highest social classes; in the 16th century, Genoese scholar Agostino Giustiniani wrote, "There is no baron, prince or any king who does not consider it a great honour when on his table Cinque Terre wine is offered."

It was hailed as a wine fit for popes, and Sixtus V in the 16th century, and others, enjoyed a steady supply to the Vatican.

With so many beautiful distractions in the Cinque Terre, it is difficult for me to focus on my mission. But with strong resolve I reserve for later the other attractions vying for my attention: salty fishing villages, colourful gozzo boats used by the fishermen that have been brought from the sea and line the town squares, and the hills with their terraces of lemon and olive groves and grapevines that rise neck-achingly high. Instead, I keep a steady pace along the coastal path to a cliff-hugging restaurant where I hope to be introduced to the famed sweet nectar.

My heart skips a beat when Bar Via dell' Amore appears and I spot a vacant sun-drenched table. I'm not going to let anything get in my way, neither the local anchovies caught in only one other part of Italy nor the



Short and sweet: Sciaccheta is served at Ristorante Santuario Di Montenero above Riomaggiore. Picture: Rob Dunlop

white wine simply called Cinque Terre. No, I will cut straight to the chase. "Sciaccheta, please."

When my prize arrives, I grip the short wine glass firmly, swirl it and inspect the deep amber reflections. The perfume is indeed elegant and the intense aroma of honey surprises me, an important point that the Roman sommelier left out. I adore honey.

I allow it to touch my lips. It is sweet but delicate and

a little dry. I savour the taste, imagining fragrant honey, as I gaze down at the crashing waves, across at smiling couples and, farther afield, to the medieval village of Manarola, seemingly suspended in air. Bliss. And I haven't tasted the food yet.

Unashamedly I dunk the accompanying biscotto in the liquor and savour it, drawing in more flavours. The wine is 15 per cent alcohol.

Then I sample the sciaccheta cheese. I am indeed in heaven. The unique tastes that are enveloping me have not gone unnoticed by others, including the slow food movement.

The five medieval coastal villages of Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore, once linked only by trails and the sea, became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997. Additionally, the Cinque Terre National Park was established for further protection, in effect becoming the custodian of the history, culture and flavours of the area, including managing four heritage restaurants.

I feel blessed to be partaking of the region's offering but I'm without a walking stick; the hilly, compact region with 18km of coastline is a mecca for walking enthusiasts. I confess I'm mostly here for the food and wine and so opt for other modes of transport.

I move through the region by car, on foot when I have to, in search of the national park restaurants. With Bar Via dell' Amore already crossed off (access by foot only) I head for the winding roads above, edged by chestnut trees, to Colle del Telegrafo in La Spezia, for hearty bean soup called mesciu, made from lentils, chickpeas and barley.

In the tiny hamlet of Volastra, I find Gli Ulivi restaurant, where delicious seafood specialties include marinated anchovies, octopus and whitebait. Delicious.

But I save until last the 14th-century monastery perched on a hill above Riomaggiore with its 180-degree views of the coastline. The refectory has been converted into Ristorante Santuario di Montenero, serving the region's celebrated trenette al pesto, pasta made from organic basil grown on the sloping terraces.

My mission leaves me breathless. With everything so delicious, I wonder if I'm being blasphemous, as I am always looking past the sacred dishes of the region to the dessert wine to follow.

"Sciaccheta, sir?" Is the Pope a Catholic?

■ www.parconazionale5terre.it
■ www.cantinacinqueterre.com

LIGURIA