

Food & drink

As with so much else culinary, the Italians have the best way of rounding off a meal the combination of vino santo and biscotti is a marriage made in heaven, says Rowley Leigh.

A vine romance

On his small estate, Paolo de Marchi makes some of the best wine in Tuscany. His Chianti Classico is benchmark stuff, full of cherry fruit and ripe tannins, while successive vintages of his "super-Tuscan" Cepparello have marked it out as one of the great wines of Italy. But when I visited him four years ago, Paolo was not so much occupied with these superb reds, nor with his chardonnays, syrahs and cabernet sauvignons, but with a golden elixir that barely made up two per cent of his production vino santo. Whereas we dunk digestives in hot tea, Tuscans have a more sophisticated habit of dunking biscotti in their vino santo. Why their sweet wine is thus sanctified, I'm not sure. Communion wine is often left open, and so often has an oxidated taste similar to that of most vini santi, which may have contributed to the name. Or, perhaps, it gives benediction to the meal, though it may simply be because Tuscans like it so much. There is no question, however, that vino santo and biscotti make for a glorious dessert, though it has to be said that, when someone like Paolo makes a wine so intensely sweet and fabulously rich as his vino santo, it is complete in itself and the dunking of heaven a communion wafer in it would be a sacrilege. But there are plenty of less expensive vini santi that merit the marriage. Biscuit, as any fule no, is French for cooked twice, and biscotti are no different. They are first cooked in a roll, like a baguette, sliced when half cooked and then cooked again. Once you learn only to half cook the initial roll overcooked, it disintegrates into crumbs the job is a bit of a doddle. It requires few of the sensitive skills of either the baker or pastry cook. Since homemade biscotti are incomparably better than even the best packeted types, it seems churlish not to go to the effort of making your home. Furthermore, you can make them according to your fancy. In fact, you can go nuts. Almonds, hazelnuts and pistachios are the most commonly used, though I am sure brazils or macadamia would do very well in their place. Similarly, you can play around with the spicing: ginger, cinnamon and cardamom are all interesting, but conservative types (myself included) stick to aniseed flavours I use fennel seeds. (Cumin, however, does not work, as we found out when some young sap flavoured a whole batch with the admittedly similar looking seed.) Amaretti biscuits, on the other hand, are not for dunking. Essentially a macaroon, they have a bitterness from bitter almonds or apricot kernels that gives a nice kick at the end of the meal, helped along by a glass of vino santo, or by hit of espresso and a shot of grappa. Most commercial amaretti are of the hard-and-dry variety, the most famous being those from Saronno, in their familiar tins and wrapped in paper that rises to the ceiling when lit. Unfortunately they do not taste as good as fresh ones. Some say the best come from Piedmont, but Giorgio Locatelli, the brilliant chef at Zafferano in London, would disagree. He knows his uncle in Lombardy makes the best, and, having tasted them, I can only say the Piedmontese must be exceptional if they come even close. I have coaxed the recipe out of Giorgio and pass it on below. The result will be soft and moist and a revelation. After all, biscuits don't have to be hard and dry. Whoever invented the Jaffa cake knew what he was about.