



Maria Guglielmi prepares the dough for *cresce sfogliate*, the flatbread that made Urbino's Golden Spider restaurant famous.

FAME & FLATBREAD

BY LAURYN SMITH

VALERIO PIERGIOVANI beams as he hands freshly made *creste sfogliate* to two young men relaxing on a sunlit patio just outside Il Ragno d'Oro, a restaurant located across from Urbino's Raffaello Park. Seeing the boys' expressions change from summer exhaustion to delighted anticipation, he contentedly returns to gathering empty dishes from tables and greeting customers as though they were family. It is a typical day for Piergiovani, son of one of the 23 founders of Il Ragno d'Oro—The Golden Spider—and now part-owner himself. The restaurant proudly serves *creste sfogliate*, Urbino's thin yet dense flatbread, often stuffed with *prosciutto*, as its specialty. Though the half-moon-shaped sandwich is made throughout the region, Il Ragno d'Oro's loyalty to the original recipe marks both the dish's and the restaurant's gradual rise in popularity and fame among *Urbinati*.

Crete sfogliate could be called the street food of Urbino. Simple ingredients and a straightforward cooking process make the dish widely available in cafes throughout the area. It is made of flour, eggs, olive oil, salt, pepper, lard, and—at least at Il Ragno d'Oro—milk. Together, the components form a hearty, comfort-food meal.

To some *Urbinati*, the bread's history is that of legend. They claim that in the 15th century the sun fell in love with Urbino. The sun flew closer and closer to soak in the city's beauty, and its rays tan-

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gled in the turrets of the Ducal Palace. As it tried to free itself, it left behind golden drops, inspiring La Fornarina, a young baker, to invent the flakey flatbread now known as cresce sfogliate.

Regardless of the recipe's actual origins, this stick-to-your-ribs dish prevailed as a staple for Italian farmers. "They needed something substantial because they had to work all day long," Piergiovani says. Because the ingredients were readily available, it became tradition to bring cresce sfogliate on farmers' treks into the fields.

Il Ragno d'Oro was one of the first restaurants to bring the traditional food from the field to the menu. Born in 1946, the Spider quickly became a hopping place. Student organizations hosted summer gatherings at the restaurant. Many were send-offs for the foreign students returning home from their studies at the Università degli Studi di Urbino "Carlo Bo." Music and dancing livened the night. Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti regularly joined Carlo Bo—poet, Senator for Life of Italy, and professor and president at the university that later took his name—for a relaxing evening under the stars with blankets warming their laps. The years following the war beckoned well-known Italian instrumentalists and vocalists, such as Johnny Dorelli, to the restaurant to play upbeat tempos throughout the night for the sole purpose of forgetting tragedies and having fun. To top it all off, free local food was served

at midnight: cresce sfogliate.

Things have changed. Now Piergiovani's family is one of only two who run the business. The student organizations no longer exist. The visitors are not so famous. Newsworthy parties no longer occur. "Then again, everything changes," Piergiovani says. "Nowadays it's more quiet." But one thing remains the same.

Cresce sfogliate.

"We are special because we are still respecting the original recipe," Piergiovani says. This means that women with years of practice, such as Maria Guglielmi, are the only ones with their hands in the dough. With 15 years of cooking experience, Guglielmi prepares cresce sfogliate with ease. "The most important part of the process is that woman because she keeps the tradition alive," Piergiovani says. The years of practice are vital when it comes to cooking homemade cresce sfogliate because the process requires precision and technique.

To begin, Guglielmi combines all of the ingredients to create the dough. At Il Ragno d'Oro, the dough is made the night before it will be used. Letting it sit overnight not only saves time the next day, but the "rest" makes for a better final product. Then, every day at 4:15 p.m., Guglielmi prepares the cresce sfogliate. First, she uses a wooden rolling pin to flatten a lump of dough the size of a bowling ball to a one-inch thickness. Then she



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Pro tip: It is possible to savor Il Ragno d'Oro's famous flatbread during the frigid months. Go to the restaurant before it closes in mid-September to buy cresce sfogliate in bulk and stockpile them in your freezer.

spreads white globs of lard in a thin layer over the dough. The lard is the most important ingredient: it is what gives the flatbread its distinctive flakey texture. Afterward, Guglielmi rolls the dough slowly into a long, thin snake. At this point, she wraps it around her hand to form a thick ring. This technique aids in giving the bread its layers. Next, she flattens the ring again with the rolling pin to create a tortilla-like disk. Finally, she cooks the doughy disk for 10 minutes on a stovetop.

After sizzling on the stove, a golden and crispy cresce sfogliate is born. At this point, the bread is folded and other ingredients can be tucked inside. The traditional stuffing is meat, but at Il Ragno d'Oro, as the number of customers grew so did the choice of fillings. Now it can be savored with various types of ham, turkey, vegetables, cheese, or a combination of tomatoes and mozzarella or vegetables and cheese—Piergiovani's favorite.

Customers come from all over the Marche region to taste the flakey goodness of Il Ragno

d'Oro's cresce sfogliate. On a typical weekday, customers order about 120 flatbreads and on weekends around 300, though it is not out of the ordinary for up to 900 flatbreads to be served in a single day. Diners have only six months each year to take advantage of the freshly homemade product; the restaurant closes during the fall and winter when the wet weather makes the trip up Via Raffaello treacherous.

The distinct taste of Il Ragno d'Oro's cresce sfogliate is what keeps people coming back. It's like an Italian version of a quesadilla, though with simpler stuffings and more muted flavors. It is thicker than a tortilla and has a flakey yet doughy consistency. Commercial cresce sfogliate is crispy to the point of falling apart, but at Il Ragno d'Oro, the peppery dough is chewy and smooth. And when it's stuffed with chunky tomatoes, thinly sliced ham, or melted cheese, the warm sandwich is filling enough to last an entire afternoon or evening, just as it did for Italian farmers and those post-war revelers. ✨