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La Finanziera

AT TRATTORIA VASCHELLO D'ORO, a fabulous eatery in the quaint town of Carrù in northern Italy, the waiter sets down "the house specialty," a fragrant Marsala-laced stew. The dish's oddly spiked bits of meat immediately grab my attention. I recognize most of the ingredients—pieces of sweetbread, diced veal, bright specks of carrots and red peppers—but not the spikes. What are these morsels that look like the fingers of a doll-sized woolen glove? Despite yearly stints in Italy, my husband and I have never encountered this dish. And our friends, natives of Tuscany, are equally clueless.

We take a taste. The spikes are slightly gelatinous, with hints of delicate frog-leg flavor. "Delicious" is the consensus.

The restaurant owner and chef, Guiseppe "Beppe" Cravero, is an affable and dramatic character. He proudly introduces the dish as *la finanziaria*, but that's of little help. What do these pointy tidbits have to do with the Italian *finanziere*, which refers to a financier, banker, or customs officer? I spear one on my fork and ask Beppe what it is. "Ah, the most important ingredient!" he replies in Italian. "Cockscomb."

Cockscomb? Perhaps I don't understand the word properly. "You mean those little wobbly red things on the top of a rooster's head?" I ask. "Si, si," he assures me excitedly.

Initially, the fact of cockscomb as a culinary ingredient does not surprise me. Many ancient Roman, medieval, and Renaissance recipes call for what now seem like odd ingredients, such as peacock tongue, sheep paunch, sparrow brains, heifer udder, camel feet, rooster testicles, and yes, cockscomb. The latter was a key ingredient in pies and stews in ancient Roman times and a decorative garnish throughout the late nineteenth century. Maestro Martino's late fifteenth-century *Libro de arte coquinaria* (*The Art of Cooking*), for example, provides a recipe for How to Prepare a Pie with Cockscombs, Livers, and Testicles, which is seasoned with dried sour cherries, saffron, cinnamon, ginger, "and a generous amount of sugar."

But I'm shocked that cockscomb is being served in Italy today. How had I never encountered *finanziera* in all my previous visits? And why didn't our Tuscan friends know of the dish?

Beppe quickly provided the answer. "*Finanziera* is a dish found almost exclusively in Piedmont and is served only during the winter months," he explained. So that's why we had never tasted it—our visits had always been in the summer. Pulling a tray of cockscombs out of the freezer, Chef Beppe continued, "To have enough for the winter I begin in the summer cutting off and freezing crests from every chicken we cook." Even that is not enough. Beppe also asks three of the area's butchers to save all their cockscombs for him. It takes one thousand to make every hundred portions of *finanziera* that he serves.

Cleaning the cockscombs, which have a thick outer skin loaded with feathers, is a labor-intensive task. The feathers are plucked, and any tiny strays are burned off with a flame. The cockscombs are then washed, blanched, and soaked in lemon juice to loosen the tough skin. The entire staff, even the busboys, gathers around the kitchen table every Wednesday to peel off this outer layer. "You have to handle the crests gently, like a beautiful woman, so as not to ruin the pretty tips," Chef Beppe laughs.

To prepare *finanziera* Beppe cooks the peeled combs, along with rooster wattles and testicles, sweetbreads, calf's brain and veins, veal, and tiny meatballs in oil seasoned with garlic, rosemary, bay leaves, and other herbs. He then adds *giardiniera* (finely diced vinegar-marinated vegetables) and an extra splash of vinegar. Dry Marsala and chicken broth round out the dish's classic sweet and sour flavors.

"Most Italians outside of Piedmont have never tasted this dish," Beppe explains. "In fact, I would guess that only 50 percent of those native to the Piedmont have ever had it. When someone comes into the restaurant and orders *finanziera*, the staff knows he or she is a true gourmet. It is a wonderful dish, rich in flavor and history."



I was curious about *finanziera's* history. So I decided to visit Academia Barilla, a teaching and research center in Parma. Besides offering cooking and wine appreciation classes in state-of-the-art facilities, Academia Barilla is home to one of Italy's best gastronomic libraries, where the gracious staff and knowledgeable curator, Giancarlo Buonitzi, are eager to assist researchers. The library's more than eight thousand archival treasures include rare manuscripts, menus, and beautifully illuminated texts. It was there that the staff uncovered *finanziera's* past.

It turns out that *finanziera* is a French and Piedmont dish of the late eighteenth century. Between 1580 and 1630 cockscow stew was cited as a favored dish at the court feasts of Carlo Emanuele I, Duke of Savoy in Piedmont. However, the name *finanziera* was not attached to the dish until the late eighteenth century. Although the exact etymology is uncertain, there are two theories. One holds that the dish's main ingredients, including cockscow, constituted the fee poor farmers had to pay at the city gates to enter Turin. Another asserts that the dish—a lunch favorite

Above: A cockscow display in the window of Polleria Boano, the oldest poulterer in Alessandria, Italy (Piedmont).

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among Turin's nineteenth-century businessmen—is named after the special jacket uniform, called *la finanziaria*, that bankers wore back then. Several early nineteenth-century texts mention one Turin restaurant in particular, Ristorante Del Cambio, as key to the dish's roots.

So the next stop on my *finanziera* quest was the still-elegant Ristorante del Cambio, which first opened in Turin in 1757 and even today features *finanziera* on its menu. Daniele Sacco, Del Cambio's gracious director, confirmed that the dish was a favorite of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century businessmen. He pointed out a small portrait of Count Camillo Benso, a restaurant patron and political leader who frequently ordered *finanziera*. On another wall hung a framed menu from 1895 that lists *finanziera*, along with a ragu of cockscow over steak, as main-course options. "Del Cambio has been offering *finanziera* here for more than two hundred years," Sacco noted proudly.