

Cultural Daily

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In Liguria, it's Farinata!

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, July 2nd, 2014

La Spezia, Italy—One of the remarkable features of eating at restaurants in Italy is that there is no arrogance. Food is supposed to be made well, it is supposed to be fresh, it is supposed to be local. That's just the way it is. Waiters don't regale you information about the provenance of the lettuce or the cheese. They just take your order and bring your dinner.

Nor is the best food in restaurants with tablecloths. I always seek out the meals real people, working people, like to eat and can afford. So here, in the center of La Spezia, a small town along the Ligurian coast, I followed a line of people who were waiting for *farinata* from La Pia, a pizzeria that has been operating here since 1887.

The story of La Pia goes like this. In 1887, Signora Pia opened a small shop with a wood-burning oven to serve the working people who had been brought to La Spezia as it transformed from a tiny fishing village into an industrialized city. For a few cents, workers could have *farinata*, focaccia and chestnuts, all made from local ingredients that were in abundance and, therefore, cheap. After World War I, the shop added pizza to its menu, and started to bring it a more upscale clientele, so they added some tables. There are no tablecloths, and the place has been virtually unchanged for one hundred years.



La Pia, in the center of La Spezia, Italy. Wood is stacked below the ovens, and deep in the left oven, a *farinata* is cooking.

What is *farinata*? Its essential ingredient is chick-pea (garbanzo bean) flour, ground fine. You add water to make a fairly liquid batter and then let it sit overnight. In the morning, there will be foam on top, and you skim all of it off. Then you add a fair amount of olive oil, some salt, a little more water if necessary to give it the consistence of buttermilk, and pour it into a large flat pan with a rim. The batter should be about a eighth of an inch thick, and it cooks in the hot, wood-burning oven for 20 minutes or so.

At La Pia, the pan is round, and nearly a meter in diameter. Using a tool, a cook tips and gently rocks the pan in the oven, during the first few minutes as the batter firms up. Then it emerges, golden-colored, crusty and brown at the edges. You go up to the counter, say how much you want. The cook cuts a triangular slice, gives it a few chops with the knife to make it easier to eat if you're doing take-away, places the *farinata* on a sheet of paper and weighs it. You pay at the cash register, and grind some fresh black pepper on top before you leave.

Chick-pea flour has a surprisingly mild taste, slightly nutty, slightly sweet. The scent of olive oil rises from the warm *farinata*, and the amount of oil makes it crispy. (If you plan to make this at home, don't skimp on the oil. La Pia uses far more olive oil than most recipes call for, which is the key to their *farinata*'s lightness and delicious crunchy brown edges.)

At La Pia, *farinata* comes in two varieties: plain, and with thinly cut, cooked-sweet onions (pictured above). Either way, it is real food for real people who are really hungry, and can satisfy themselves for a couple of euros.

La Pia

Via Magenta 12

La Spezia, Italy

www.lapia.it

Photos by Adam Leipzig

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